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# Case Study 4:

## Creative approaches to learning about the Bristol blitz

— Penelope Harnett, Greg Davies, Steve Baxter and Robbie Keast

### Introduction

The University of the West of England, Bristol has *strong partnerships with many local schools* and is developing **innovative ways in working with trainees, teachers and children**. The approach taken to learning about the **Bristol Blitz** provides an example of this partnership.

- The whole of the ground floor space of the education building at the university was taken over with **displays of World War II artefacts, pictures, photographs and reconstructions of a living room, kitchen and a war time cafe**.
- **Such displays** provided a stimulus for year 6 children from Henleaze Junior and Charborough Road Primary Schools, Bristol to spend a day working with trainees on a number of activities designed to extend their *understanding of what living in Bristol might have been like during the war years*.

### The Bristol Blitz day Activities

The day was planned to provide trainees with first-hand experience of working **across different subject areas within an historical topic**. Trainees were able to recognise how learning in different subjects could extend children's understanding of a period of time. *Amongst the activities*, the children:

1. cooked war time recipes
2. sewed their own toys
3. designed and made a gardening tool to plant seeds and seedlings
4. undertook military drills as members of the home guard
5. learned wartime songs and dances
6. decoded messages

### Empathy: affective understanding

There has been much debate concerning the extent to which children can **empathise** with people living in the past (Portal). Through engaging with the **Blitz Day activities**

the children did have opportunities to consider the points of view and feelings of people living at the time. For example, *cooking with war time ingredients* enabled children to appreciate the lack of variety in war time diets. *Evacuation from the warm university building to the air raid shelter outside*, where the children shivered in the cold, permitted children to experience some of the hardships occurring during the air raids, although not the fear as the aircraft flew overhead and the bombs were dropped.

### Understanding WWII: the local dimension

Primary aged children's **knowledge of the Second World War** is often derived from films portraying battle scenes and military exploits. Learning about the effects of the war on the lives of people living in Bristol provides a further dimension for children's learning and the opportunity to contextualise local events within national and global histories.

### The Blitz day's curricular role

The day served as a **stimulus for future work for one school**. A class teacher explained, we are doing the Second World War in year 6 in the next few weeks, so this should be an excellent preparation. I think it just brings it to life. On the other hand an activity day such as this could be used at the end of a project to consolidate children's knowledge and to enable them to contribute what they have learned previously to the different activities.

### Imagination, creativity and historical learning

#### Imagination and experience: hands on learning Immersion in the learning.

Teachers and children made a tremendous effort **to dress-up, and immerse themselves in character for the event at UWE**. It took careful planning, and a lot of enthusiasm to set-up the scenes, and to design the numerous workshops. This is *the kind*

*of imaginative experience that is so conducive to learning*. It demonstrates how *active participation in workshops captures the attention of everyone*, and positively encourages children to learn. Knowledge can be obtained from books of course, but pupils often *learn best from practical experience*, and through the act of doing, as kinaesthetic learners.

### Hands on learning

The whole day was a magnificent example of **how this hands-on method of teaching** provided the children with the opportunity to lose themselves, and exercise their imagination in strange and exciting environments in order to get a taste of what life was like during the Bristol Blitz. The memories of such learning experiences remain with us throughout our lives, and this method of teaching is one of the key techniques of teaching and, above all, for learning.

### The informed imagination

As the University of the West of England subject leader Sally Bassett (one of the main event organisers) said, It's all about having an experience of World War Two, to think about what life was like in Bristol during the bombing and during those years, and get some perspective on history. The event certainly achieved that.

### The Blitz newspaper

During the day, *three trainees took on the role of the press; photographing, interviewing and making observations about the different activities*. They met their deadlines and produced **the newspaper** at the end of the day for the children to keep as a memento of their visit to the university. The newspaper provides a creative record of the different activities, which the children could develop further on their return to school.

Penelope Harnett, University of the West of England, Bristol.  
 Greg Davies, Steve Baxter, Robbie Keast, postgraduate primary trainees, University of the West of England, Bristol.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

8TH NOV. 1940

LOCAL DEFENCE VOLUNTEERS

The Land Defence Volunteers managed to train some new recruits during the course of the day, including plucky Ollie Russell, a 10-year-old from Charborough Road School. He was put through his paces with some precision marching drills and was clearly delighted to be putting his best foot forward to help his country. "I really want to graduate as a Land Defence Volunteer," he told the Blitz. "It was really good to find out about all the things that happened during the war."



THE MAKE-DO AND MEND

The Make-Do and Mend workshop gave children the opportunity to boost morale with some home-made sock puppets. Anushay Athar, 10, from Year 6 at Henleaze, took time out from making a monkey from an old sock to speak to Bristol Blitz. She said: "I put some stuff inside the sock and then we're going to make it into the character."



CODES AND CIPHERS

Codebreakers were also hard at work during the day, cracking ciphers and translating secret messages. Emma Rank of Charborough Road School said: "At the moment we have got these French messages and we are putting them into English." However, the top secret mission meant that trainees had to ensure the safety of everyone involved. Martha Torbey, of Henleaze Junior School, said: "We have had to sign a document to say that we won't tell anyone else about what we've been doing."

SPY SCHOOL

Trainee young spies were hard at work trying to break behind enemy lines, as they learned survival French to make sure they wouldn't be spotted by the enemy in occupied Paris. Oliver Razey, 10, from Charborough Road School, said: "In Spy School we learned lots of important information that would be useful to spies in France. We learned how to order in a café and how to buy train tickets. It was quite hard to learn the language but I really enjoyed it, and now I can order a hot chocolate in France – un chocolat chaud."



PROPAGANDA

The result of bombing during the war meant that children had to be deterred from clambering over dangerous sites, so the Propaganda group made posters to warn youngsters of the danger. Yazmin Aidede, from Henleaze Junior School, said: "We had to do posters for all the children to make sure that they wouldn't be rummaging around on bombsites."



KEEPING UP OUR SPIRITS

But it wasn't all doom and gloom. David Warner, Angus White and George Stagg got into the wartime mood in the Keeping Up Spirits group with a modern twist on a 1940s classic. The trio improvised their own Gangnam Style dance to the music of Glenn Miller. David said: "We have been learning songs, including We'll Meet Again, and we have been making up our own song to keep up spirits. We're going to be celebrating because the war is over and it's VE Day."



# Bristol Blitz

A DAY IN THE LIFE

8TH NOV. 1940

Bristol pupils travelled back in time today as they experienced what life was like during the Second World War. The youngsters were evacuated to the University of the West of England's Frenchay Campus, where a host of activities gave the children an insight into what it was like during the Blitz.

## DIGGING FOR VICTORY

Over at the 'Dig for Victory' garden, green-fingered children grew vegetables to help the war effort. The class worked hard in the workshop to make their own dibber tools to help plant seedlings, using saws and wood. The youngsters learned the value of vegetables in the fight against Hitler, and how the lack of sugar meant that carrots on sticks became a tasty treat for youngsters who were deprived of sweets. Gloriana Suri, 10, a Year 6 pupil from Henleaze Junior School, said: "I really like it because I have learned lots of things that I didn't know before about the second world war and about how people lived back in those days."



## GAS MASKS, SHELTERS AND STAYING SAFE

The air-raid siren sounded halfway through the morning, sending brave youngsters out to the Anderson shelter to take cover from the bombardment. Fortunately their home-made gas masks meant that the group suffered no serious casualties, thanks also to the efforts of the first-aid volunteers. Courageous Erin Smith admired the shelter, saying: "I don't really know much about shelters but I've been in one before."



**BEWARE IMPOSTERS!**  
THIS ROGUE GENDARME WAS  
SPOTTED AS A NAZI BY  
CUNNING SPIES.

## DR CARROT'S COOKERY CLUB

At Dr Carrot's Cookery Club, Gabriel Maroty, a 10-year-old pupil of Henleaze Junior School, was getting stuck into some potato peeling. "We're doing cooking and it's a lot of fun," he said. "It reminds me of being at home because I peel potatoes at home for my mum."

Vida Quick, 10, added: "I like cooking and at home I've made a whole roast duck with my dad."



## EVACUATION

Evacuation was another theme of the event, which intrigued Jack Tomkins, 11, from Henleaze Junior School. "We are just having a look at what children put in their suitcases and what they would take," he said, "and we have been learning about the areas in the country where there were the worst bombings - London, Glasgow, Bristol and Coventry, where the Spitfires were made."

