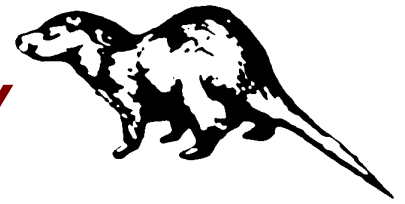


NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



VICTORIAN BRITAIN: HENRY AT BOARDING SCHOOL

TEACHERS' NOTES

We taught these two lessons midway through the Victorian Britain Study Unit. In earlier sessions we had investigated the conditions of children working in the coal mines (see [Down the Mine](#)). Now we turned to schools.

The class's Victorian topic books all focused on day schools, so I decided to deal with a very different kind of school: boarding school. I had a copy of an 1822 letter written by an unhappy boarder named Henry to his father. The letter could illuminate for the children that in the 19th century working class children were not the only ones to suffer miserable living conditions. It also formed the first clue in a personal story that unfolded over the two lessons.

Henry's boarding school flourished in the first half of the nineteenth century. Charles Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby* fictionalised such schools in the graphically-described Dotheboys Hall. His publicising of boarding school conditions helped to improve them as the century progressed.

Year group/class

Year 5/6, mixed gender and ability. Thirty-one in the class.

Teaching time

Two lessons, of one-and-a-half hours each.

Learning objectives

For the children to:

- pursue an historical enquiry, raising questions and using original sources

- gain an understanding of conditions in early nineteenth century boarding schools
- be able to read and interpret difficult and challenging texts
- understand and use the persuasion genre.

Key question

What were boarding schools like in the early nineteenth century?

Resources

Source A: Extract from Henry's private letter, handwritten and typed versions (found in: Fines, John (1988) *Documents: A manual for students*).

Source B1: Newspaper report of court case, Jones vs Shaw

B2: Court account table (text-breaker)

B3: Court case glossary

Source C1: Advertisement for Mr Galland's Academy

C2: Advertisement for Mr Galland's Academy (text-breaker)

Source D1: Letter from Henry's father to Mr Halmer

D2: Comparison table

Source E: Letter from Henry to Mr Halmer

The teaching [Lesson 1]

Episode 1

Focus: Activating prior knowledge; reading Henry's letter; raising questions.

We knew the children already had knowledge of Victorian times from museums, books, television and other sources. So we began by finding out what mental models they had formed about Victorian education.

Their replies:

- They wrote on slates.
- If you were naughty you had your hand hit with a cane.
- If you couldn't do the work you had to stand in the corner with a tall dunce's cap on your head.

So they had some common pictures of Victorian schools in their minds.

I asked: How did Victorian children feel about their schools? Luckily letters they have written have survived. I have one here, from a book of documents collected by John Fines. It's a very miserable letter from boarding school, sent by a boy named Henry.

We gave out copies of Henry's private letter (typed, with handwritten version on the back) and also put it on the overhead as shared text. I explained and demonstrated how 's' used often to be written as 'f'.

We read the letter aloud, with the children following closely on their copies – about half opted to read the handwritten version.

We asked them to underline any words they didn't understand. They came up with:

obliged, barley bread, chaff, used more like bears than Christians.

These we explained and discussed. The children were fascinated by the idea of bear-baiting.

Now we asked the children, in pairs, to write down three or more questions they would like to ask about Henry's letter – what would they like to find out? This technique prevents the premature articulators from calling out and gives more reflective children a chance to think about and record their questions.

The pairs scribbled hard for five minutes, then we went round the class asking each pair for their best question. We pooled the questions on the flipchart, and a good set of historians' questions they were, incorporating the key When, Where, Who, How and Why questions:

Why doesn't Henry include his mum in it?

Why does he have to write an X at the bottom?

Why hasn't he seen his dad for two years?

Who is Edwin?

Why are they treating him badly?

Who is Mr Smith?

Why did Mr Smith have to read every letter?

Did his dad like Henry?

When did school inspectors start?

Was their bread really black?

Where is Cotherstone Academy?

Is there more to the letter?

How did Henry get the letter past the teacher?

Why would Henry have been flogged for writing a letter to his father?

Why was Henry sent away if it's such a horrible place?

How old is Henry?

We discussed each question, in the process repeatedly scanning the letter for possible answers. Dawn spotted that this was only an *extract* from Henry's private letter, so we could cross off the question: Is there more to the letter? The conversation ranged widely, with the children making good inferences from the letter (e.g. He would probably be flogged because he's saying bad things about the school) and showing:

- understanding of concepts such as censorship
- sensitivity about family relationships (they thought that perhaps Henry was an unloved child)
- inside knowledge about emotional blackmail (Anna: I think he's going over the top and exaggerating because he wants to get home).

Episode 2

*Focus: Pursuing the enquiry about Henry and boarding schools.
Reading difficult and challenging texts.*

I asked: How can we check whether Henry's letter is telling the truth about his boarding school? What do historians do – they look for different pieces of evidence to compare against each other. So, are there other sources of information about boarding schools in the north of England in the 1820s?

I told them how I'd tried to find out more about Henry, and whether his letter had reached his father. I had searched libraries and telephoned the curator of the Bowes Museum in Barnard Castle – near Cotherstone Academy. The result: two new documents. The Bowes Museum curator had kindly sent me an advertisement for a school near Cotherstone, and in the library I had found an account of a court case between headmaster Mr Shaw and his former pupil William Jones (Sources B1 and C1).

We divided the class into two groups, giving Group 1 the court case to work on, and Group 2 the advertisement. Tony, their teacher, worked on the court report with Group 1, while I helped Group 2 tackle the advertisement.

To help Group 1 (the weaker readers) to understand their text, we gave them a glossary of words and a textbreaker frame (Sources B2 and B3) to fill in.

We set them two tasks: to find out what had happened at Mr Shaw's school and at the court case, then to construct a series of tableaux to tell the story of William Jones' woeful experiences at the school.

Group 2 tackled the advertisement. They also had a textbreaker (Source C2) to help them deconstruct the meaning of this difficult document.

Their task was to find the key points of the advertisement and then to design a poster advertising the academy, using the persuasion genre.

Episode 3

Focus: Group and pair work on the documents.

Each group set to, with Tony and me mediating their learning. Within each group the children worked in pairs to complete their textbreaker frames. Using the frames they clarified who, when, where, what and how.

Tony and Group 1 worked out the sequence of William Jones' story and negotiated which eight scenes they would include in their tableaux.

I talked about posters with Group 2, posing questions to draw out explicitly the features of this form of persuasion genre:

– What were they trying to do? (Liz: Make you notice them.) Yes, clever girl.

– What is our particular poster trying to do? (Liz again: Make the parents send their children to the school.)

– How did they do this? (We identified key features of Galland's advertisement, then talked about the features an advertisement today would use: big letters, bright colours, eye-catching shapes and the main information).

All worked busily until the bell went. Group 1 had rehearsed their tableaux in the hall and were ready to act out the story next week. Group 2 were well on with drafting their posters.

The teaching [Lesson 2]

Episode 1

Focus: Communicating learning through drama – tableaux.

We started with Group 1, who couldn't sit still until they'd showed us their play. We all filed into the hall and the eight tableaux unrolled, with much scuffling and re-arranging of PE mats between each one.

1 William Jones arrives at Mr Shaw's school, and is treated well – given toast for breakfast.

2 William and the other boys have to do their school work without their jackets and trousers (much elaborate shivering from the actors).

3 The boys wash in the horse trough; the big boys use the only two towels (opportunity for even more shivering).

4 Tea-time, with only water, milk and bread to eat.

5 Five boys to a bed (much pushing and shoving on the mat – the scene brought a whole new meaning to: *There were ten in the bed and the little one said ...*)

6 Trying to flea the beds with quills.

7 Finding maggots in the Sunday pot skimmings (their sounds of disgust would have impressed the *Carry On* team).

8 Going blind and being sent to the wash-house.

Much hilarity, but also a distinct sense of relief that they were not really in that world.

Episode 2

Focus: Persuasion genre – presenting Group 2's posters.

Now it was Group 2's turn. Each pair held up their work and explained how their poster would entice parents to send their children to Mr Galland's Academy.

Episode 3

Focus: Two more letters; comparing reasons for disliking the school.

The children still didn't know whether Henry's letter had reached his father. I now revealed that I had made a visit to Bowes Museum, where I had found two more letters. One was from Henry's father, Mr Heritage, to Mr Halmer (Source D1). We distributed the letter, and read it aloud, with the children following on their copies.

Finally we could confirm that Henry's father *had* received his 'sly' letter via Mr Halmer, that Edwin was indeed Henry's younger brother, and that their mother was dead, as we had guessed. The children were sure that Henry's father would take him and Edwin out of Cotherstone Academy.

We now moved to comparing Henry's letter with his father's. Their letters had given very different reasons for objecting to the school. Working in pairs, the children used a comparison table (Source D2)

to list Henry's and Mr Heritage's reasons for not liking the school. Much resigned recognition of the parental focus on spelling.

The final source, a duty letter from Henry to Mr Halmer, was written after Henry and Edwin had arrived safely back home in London (Source E). The class were delighted that Henry had escaped from Cotherstone. They were tired now, so I simply read them the letter, explaining the difficult words.

On reflection, this was a letter too far for the eight less able Year 5s in the class, and next time I would save it for a new day, and probably cut it for them. For the more able, it provides a rich source for extension work, from elaborate sentence constructions and archaic letter forms to the insight it gives us into Henry's character, his tendency to conspiracy theorising and his unhappy position as the less loved son.

Episode 4

Focus: Reviewing initial questions and establishing our state of knowledge.

We put up the list of initial questions about Henry's letter. Could we now answer any more of them? Bursting with knowledge from the extra documents, the children followed attentively while I read out each question. We ticked off the questions as we answered them.

I noticed that they were far more confident than before to infer answers to the questions.

At the end, we found we had ticked all but one question (When did school inspectors start?) [See the end of these notes.]

Episode 5

Focus: Persuasive letter writing.

Henry's letter is an example of both letter-writing and persuasion genres.

We now asked the children imagine they were at boarding school and to write a letter to their parents, telling them about conditions there. What details would they include to persuade their parents to bring them back home? One boy decided to write a report instead (see examples of children's work).

The children started writing their letters, finishing them the next day.

Learning outcomes

The children:

- were able to read and understand genuine historical sources in the form of difficult and challenging texts
- gained a good understanding of conditions in early nineteenth century boarding schools
- have understood and produced work using the persuasion genre, in both pictorial and written forms
- began to explore different interpretations and perspectives regarding 19th century society.

Nuffield Primary History project

General editors: Jacqui Dean and Jon Nichol

Author of this unit: Jacqui Dean

© Nuffield Primary History 2002

downloaded from www.nuffieldfoundation.org/primaryhistory

Government inspection of schools

The first HMI was checking schools all over England and Wales from 1840 to 1847, too late for Henry, and he was only checking government-funded schools.