**‘Pride and Prejudice: in search of our national identities’**

**A project between The Mount and Millthorpe Schools in York and Philipp Melanchthon Gymnasium in Grünheide, Germany supported by UK-German Connection**

**Meeting in York: Saturday 26th March – Tuesday 29th March 2011**

The group of 11 students and 2 staff from Grünheide arrived late on Saturday evening and were met by their host families. After a good night’s sleep we all met at The Mount School on Sunday morning to begin our work together.

After a short ‘ice-breaker’, our first session was spent presenting our terms’ work to each other. Further information about the content of the two presentations is presented in Appendix ‘Visit to York’**.** Both presentations were distinctive and informative, with plenty of light-hearted moments. They both showed the depth and breadth of work that the students had been involved in to prepare for the meeting in York.

Following the presentations we asked the students to work in small mixed groups to come up with questions they would like to put to the ‘Question Time’ panel (see later). The students were asked to focus on the topic ‘national identity’ and staff were on hand to help with translation as necessary. The questions were then submitted to the chair who chose a range of questions from those submitted.

We were very fortunate that the weather was sunny for the whole visit and so small mixed groups of students could take advantage of their free time in York. As the Grünheide students had a tour of the city arranged for Monday, York students were asked to take their groups to places that they themselves really liked. It was a time for getting to know each other more informally.

We returned to school for the ‘Question Time’ discussion. We had arranged for four people to join us in order to raise the level of our discussion about national identity. Kurt Strauss and his family escaped Germany in 1939 and he went on to become an engineer and is now retired and lives in York. Carin Burchell is a Trade Mark Attourney whose mother was German and Carin spent every summer as a child in the GDR and still frequently travels to see family and friends in Germany. John Reddick was a fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge and then a Professor at Sydney and Liverpool universities. He has written books on Günter Grass and Georg Büchner and regularly translates academic works. Frank Soboczenski is a PhD student at York University. His subject is IT and he also does some work for the UN as well as being German assistant at The Mount School.

We were delighted by the focus of and depth to which the students thought during the hour long Question Time session. The chair asked individuals to put the selected questions to each of the panel members, shuffled questions and often asked for views from the audience. The questions drew out ideas such as that nationality is only part of what forms a person’s identity, along with time, place, location, work, community at any given time, family, other people. We discussed the idea that some Germans still have a ‘wall in their heads’ and that Britain has been more united politically and linguistically for longer. We acknowledged that labels can lead to stereotypes, but that they do save time and they can vary depending on who one is with and where. The general feeling of the room was that we wanted to be as expansive as possible in our identity. The question about pride in one’s country raised questions in return as to whether it was possible to be proud of a country and whether instead it was better to say one was proud or ashamed of specific things a country did. We realised that national identity tends to become an issue only when defining ourselves in relation to other people or when something in the identity seems to be threatened and acknowledged that national identity is very hard to define, perhaps particularly for the British. We have all become more aware of the impact of historical context on national identity. The students were very clear that they did not want to be taught about national identity, but wanted to discuss it - rather as this project is doing!

On Monday the York students spent the morning in school and the Grünheide students, after a formal welcome at The Mount School, had a tour of some of York’s historic sites, including the Walls and the Minster from one of York’s voluntary guides. At their request the tour was in English and he spoke to them clearly and engagingly about some of York’s past; even explaining change ringing of bells using the students as bells to demonstrate.

For our afternoon session we all met at York’s Castle Museum where the students were again divided into small, mixed groups. Each group was given one the themes of British identity and asked to find examples of it from the museum’s collection. Back at The Mount School we then asked students to feedback their selections and explain why they thought their choices illuminated their theme. We then asked them to select which of the exhibits they would choose to produce a museum special display about British national identity. Finally, groups had to develop a title for their display and explain how they felt their display would put across big messages as well as giving specific detail. We had some imaginative title suggestions, for example ‘Controversial Minds’ and ‘Typically British?’

By this stage of the visit the students were really gelling as a group and Monday evening saw several impromptu arrangements between all the students to go to the cinema and ‘round to peoples’ houses; kindly facilitated by parents.

On Tuesday we focused upon drawing our ideas together creatively and working once more in small mixed groups. The Art Department at The Mount School introduced us to some of the links between German and British art and then led us in the production of large collages about national identity. Each student had been asked to bring a picture of a role model of theirs from the 20th century, a piece of design from their country and to think of which colour they would associate with their country. Lots of other collage resources were available and students worked to design and produce their own piece of work. It was good to watch them overcoming any linguistic boundaries with demonstrations etc to put together a shared piece of work. The pictures of the collages they produced are shown in Appendix ‘Visit to York’ and each group was asked to explain the thinking behind their collage to the others.

In the middle of the day the Grünheide students took a break to be part of a Year 4 German lesson. A good time was had by all and the younger students were particularly impressed by the Easter Haribo they were given. One student also attended an A level music recital as she is interested in studying music herself and all of the students went to the Mount School talent show which happened to be on that day after school. The local paper, the York Press, also came to photograph the students working on their collages.

Our final activity together was a pizza at a local restaurant and then we said our goodbyes and the Grünheide students stayed at The Mount School listening to music and chatting until their coach left in the early hours of Wednesday morning.

Before we finished our day’s work on Tuesday a few students recorded some of their reflections for the Historical Association. They had requested a podcast for their student zone. We also posted several times on [www.radiowaves.co.uk/yorkissp](http://www.radiowaves.co.uk/yorkissp) throughout the visit. We asked the students to write reflections on the visit and a few representative extracts of these can be read below:

*“What surprised me most was that we have more similarities than differences between our two countries. Our countries are more alike than it seems.”*

*“It surprised me how similar the German and British mentalities are which meant we got on so well.”*

*“I found it surprising that our stereotypes of each other and ourselves were so similar.”*

*“My expectations before the project were that they would speak no English and be not very nice and be nothing like they are and not like anything we like. My expectations were completely wrong they were the opposite to everything I thought.”*

*“What surprised me most was how similar we are not only as a nation but as teenagers … we also believe our countries have things not only to be proud of but also ashamed of.”*

*“Our collages showed that our countries have very strong but also very complex and often contradictory identities.”*

*“The thing I liked best about this project was that I got the chance to meet people not only from a different school but also from a different country.”*

*“It really helped we’d all ‘met’ on Radiowaves beforehand.”*

*“On Sunday we had such deep thought about national identity and created new ideas about our own opinions on identity and labelling people.”*

*“I was surprised by how little we know about Germany that was not a stereotype or related to tourism.”*

*“I’ve found out how hard it is to define what is British and what our national identity is because we are influenced by so many different countries.”*

*“I was surprised that so may things we use in Britain every day have been designed and made in Germany.”*

*“We cannot relate to the ‘fortress Britain’ mentality anymore and need to move on from past events.”*

*“What surprised me about the other country was how organised they all were … a round of applause for them.”*

*“I enjoyed making the collage … it was nice to have something physical to show of our time together.”*

*“The art project helped me to learn a lot about what Germany see as their main identity. It gave us chance to just talk together and be creative.”*

*“I liked going to the Castle Museum because I liked showing the German students some of our history because it is important to me.”*

*“I enjoyed finding out what the German students thought of our lives in England and their reactions to some British things, for example Marmite.”*

*“We created friendships which I hope will last.”*

*“I loved how everyone got along and no one was left out.”*

*“The ease of conversation and the laughing that went on was both overwhelming, surprising and relieving.”*

*“We created friendships and we found that together we are stronger.”*

*“It was a fantastic experience to host one of the German students.”*

*“The time on our own in York really helped us to get to know each other.”*

*“It was nice that we were put into different groups so that we got a chance to work with different people.”*

*“What I liked best about the project was that it was a lot of fun. I think everyone enjoyed what we were doing and the things we produced came out of that.”*

*“They were really sweet when I tried to speak German and replied in a way that I could understand.”*

*“I really enjoyed speaking to and getting to know both the students from PM Gymnasium and Millthorpe – even if I didn’t get to practise my atrocious German on our visitors because their English is far too good.”*

*“This project has made me want to really improve my German – and fast!”*

*“I had stereotyped views like people at the Mount would be posh and the Germans would be strict and that but I was wrong and I’m glad.”*

*“The activity has covered all I hoped it would do and more, it has been a fun and interesting experience.”*

Helen Snelson

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