**‘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**

**Report on the York project work, January-March 2011**

Having already established contact and successfully worked with PMG in 2009, we were all keen to try a more ambitious project involving work over a longer period of time and meetings in York and Berlin. In order to make the project manageable at the York end, it was decided to focus our efforts on an activity between two of the York ISSP schools: Millthorpe and The Mount. We agreed to communicate online once more via [www.radiowaves.co.uk/yorkissp](http://www.radiowaves.co.uk/yorkissp)

Students were recruited from both schools on the basis of interest in the project and willingness to commit to an after school activity every Wednesday at The Mount. A group of 19 students met regularly each week to explore the topic and prepare for our meeting in York.

**Week 1**

* We brainstormed our existing thoughts and knowledge about identity and what creates national identity and came up with: language; art , culture and music; history; sport; ancestry, relatives and family; geography; food; religion; flags and symbols; myths and stereotypes; tradition
* Next we introduced the key questions of our project: what does it mean to be British? What stereotypes are used to define the British? What are the problems of defining the British? Should we define the British? How has British identity been shaped and changed? What are the differences between native and foreign perceptions of Britishness? Do we feel British? How relevant is being British to us?
* We learnt how to use Radiowaves and introduced the York students to the Grünheide students, explaining that they were investigating the same as us but for Germany. The York students did their own introductory blogs.
* Next we brainstormed how we thought foreigners perceive the British and how we stereotype the Germans. Our ideas were written up as online stories ‘A day in the life of John Smith’ and ‘A day in the life of Hans Schmidt’. You can see these stories as [www.radiowaves.co.uk/yorkissp](http://www.radiowaves.co.uk/yorkissp)
* Students were asked to collect ideas about how people responded when asked to list ‘typically British’ things. Some of these are in the Appendix ‘Typically British’.
* Some thoughts about national identity were raised via a powerpoint. All powerpoints are in Appendix ‘Powerpoints’

**Week 2**

At the start of each session from now on we started with the Radiowaves site and discussed questions and issues emerging through the online stories and discussion. The essence of these discussions can be seen at [www.radiowaves.co.uk/yorkissp](http://www.radiowaves.co.uk/yorkissp). The text for some of the stories can be seen at Appendix – online stories

The theme for this week was British identity through traditions and famous people. Students worked in three groups. The groups were asked to discuss: Are these positive or negative views of Britain? How does what we are looking at suggest the British define themselves? What are the problems / issues with defining Britishness in this way? Do you accept these as definitions of Britishness with which you are comfortable being identified?

* Group 1: A selection of traditional images that have been used to represent Britain with some thinking questions
* Group 2: the days of the year we celebrate and have holidays upon with some thinking questions
* Group 3: work with the 2002 ‘Greatest Britons’ list and some thinking questions

(all worksheets are to be found in Appendix – worksheets)

Discussion flowed about our findings and we made the following notes in response to these questions, some of which clearly show our thinking was ranging widely.

* What do our traditions/famous people suggest about British identity? It’s diverse and made up of many things, contradictory, very much based in the past – empire, acknowledges good and bad, has a world-wide influence, tolerant and accepting, it’s not neutral, characterful, quirky intelligence and independent thinking, acceptance of weirdness, cliques and sub-groups
* Do we think they present an accurate picture of the British? Yeah!, hard to judge own times, Britain has changed so much since 1945, old-fashioned, not very up-to-date, is the present too complicated?, is the past easier to detach from?, we can agree on the past?
* Does it matter if the picture is inaccurate? Yes, for the way we’re seen in the world, our recent history presents us as the ‘good guys’ – have we forgotten other stuff?, is it shaped by WW2?, identity is something you have in the present – immigrants have to accept it, gives us security
* How do we imagine British traditions/famous people may have changed in 50 years time? No one will remember St Swithen’s Day, less directly Christian, more commercial, more cautious, still will be past memories of WW2 and Empire, depends what happens between now and then!

**Week 3**

This week we researched key events in the story of Britain. We started with a powerpoint (see Appendix) introduction and added to our growing list of themes of British identity by spending some time with the conclusions of Patrick Dillon’s ‘The Story of Britain’. The result of our research was to summarise the essence of each event onto a post-it note for a large timeline. We then discussed which events would be evidence of our themes of British identity. For example, we decided the Battle of Trafalgar fed love of tradition and the expulsion of the Jews clearly was part of cruelty and injustice, while the Spanish Armada went under ‘Fortress Britain’ and Magna Carta we placed under both love of liberty and fairness and toleration.

**Week 4**

This week we turned our attention to key trends in the story of Britain. After re-connecting with our themes of British identity we divided into small groups and each group took a key theme: Britain as a world power, immigration to Britain, the development of freedom, economy and trade, the English language, the evolution into a liberal democracy and philosophical and scientific learning (see Appendix – worksheets). Each group summarised their trend and explained how they thought it had informed our identity today. For example, it was decided that Britain being a haven for immigrants over many centuries was part of the theme of fairness and toleration, that the development of a world-wide Empire was part of being outgoing and interested, the flexibility of the English language was part of quirkiness and the development of a worldwide Empire with the help of the slave trade was of course cruel and unjust. From this work it was decided to add a new heading of conservative and small-minded, for example, because England only had two universities for a long time. We also began to have some discussion about how British identity is something that has developed and changed over time.

**Week 5**

After our by now customary review and discussion of the online work, we turned to different interpretations of Britain from different points in time. Each group was challenged by some key questions to feed back to us all. They had to think carefully how to divide up the tasks and also how to search intelligently on the web and were given guidance on this. They had to think about the social, economic and political milieu of the time of the writer – the threats, challenges and opportunities being faced. The interpretations were:

Bede

Chaucer

Caxton

Shakespeare

The Levellers

Paine’s Common Sense

Hogarth

Macaulay

Kipling poem

Woolf

Churchill

Schama

This was the most intellectually challenging task we set, but by this stage engagement was high and we had created an atmosphere where it was OK to find things challenging and to do ones best. During the feedback session we discussed further how British identity has changed over time and began to see variation within the themes. For example at the time of Caxton, a gentleman had to speak French – a point we felt was part of the class-bound theme which would no longer be the case today. Likewise we decided that since the time of Kipling and ‘the White Man’s Burden’ we have become more sensitive to recognising cruelty and injustice from the perspective of others. We also decided that religion had been a unifying theme; again something we felt is not the case today. It was also interesting to see similarities across the centuries with Bede discussing the island identity in similar ways to Shakespeare and Churchill.

**Week 6**

Our final week of exploration was themed ‘Britain in danger! Creating a national myth?’ We chose to focus on 1940 and used posters and pictures, clips of Churchill’s speeches and Vera Lynn, the Olivier ‘Henry V’ and the ‘Four Corners’ propaganda film. As a result of our research we decided that the theme of British identity had been deliberately manipulated in time of crisis to emphasise the positive themes and the idea of fortress Britain. We decided that the confident certainties expressed at the time had had implications for Britain since 1945. Perhaps that time has been hard to live up to?

**Putting together our presentation**

The list of identity themes we had arrived at to use in our presentation were: belief in liberty and free speech; fairness and toleration; cruelty and injustice; outgoing and interested; clever and inventive; quirky and individual; conservative, small-minded and class-bound; love of tradition; fortress Britain; a multicultural and multi-faith society.

We used these to develop our presentation over four weeks’ sessions. We wrote our scripts, revised themes and ideas, developed resources and practised. We were very tight for time, but felt the presentation we gave on the first day of the York meeting gave a reflection not just of the work we had done, but of the fun we had had along the way.

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