Take one day:

undertaking an in-depth local enquiry

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Local history units of study provide teachers with valuable opportunities, but these can also seem daunting. Potential challenges for teachers include the perceived overwhelming scope of the topic, difficulties in developing subject knowledge and knowing where to find resources. However, none of these is insurmountable, if teachers identify a clear learning focus and are realistic about what can be achieved. Where teachers take this approach, local history enquiries can present a rich learning experience for children.

With the Key Stage 2 National Curriculum's heavy emphasis on early periods of history, there are few opportunities to engage with the full range of primary sources (DfE, 2013, pp.189–192). If carefully selected, however, local history units lend themselves to work using sources such as photographs, diaries, newspapers and even oral histories. Local studies offer opportunities for pupils to work in depth. It is worth remembering that there is no statutory requirement stipulating the length of a unit of work; across a key stage, units of work do not need to be of equal length. This means that it would be acceptable to take a narrow focus in some local units, as long as clear links are made between depth and overview. Children need to be supported in making connections between the local, national and global pictures. There are other advantages to working in depth, not least the chance to engage children in high quality, enquiry-based learning. 'Doing less but better' means that children have time to immerse themselves in the learning experience and develop their knowledge, conceptual understanding and skills.

Another advantage of this approach is that children can use primary sources to focus on a self-contained narrative. They can explore the human experience, and develop empathy and an appreciation of complexity. The challenge, then, is how to define the focus. One way to overcome this dilemma might be to take one day as a vehicle for investigating big ideas.

Take one day

Taking one day addresses many of the challenges facing teachers, ensuring that the scope of the enquiry is well defined and manageable. Teachers need not worry about knowing the entire history of the local area, across long periods of time; rather they can focus on one story associated with one day in the past. In this instance, a key principle is to identify a day which is associated with a strong narrative and provides a route into people, period and place. As always, a successful enquiry should be underpinned by high-quality, source-based work. This should enable children to engage in problem-solving activities. This approach works best when a collection of linked sources is used. These sources should be used in conjunction with one another to increase their accessibility and impact.

Rather than deciding on a narrow focus at the beginning of the process, it is better to be open to a range of possibilities. Be prepared to explore archives, local history libraries and online resources to see what is available.The selection of the narrative focus should be led by the availability of sources.

Case study: one day, one street, one bomb

Context: a short, in-depth local history enquiry in a Year 5 class that previously had little experience of working with written sources.

We began by deciding that we wanted to teach children about Cheltenham during WWII. A straightforward internet search was a good place to start and we found that there had been several bombing raids in the town, some of which resulted in fatalities. The search uncovered a photograph of a war memorial and first-hand accounts of bombing raids. Because we had uncovered the dates of the raids, we were able to undertake a more tightly focused search of

Gloucestershire Archives online catalogue. This revealed that a collection of photographs from a local newspaper was housed in the local history library. It was the discovery of these rich primary sources, revealing the very human story of one raid on Stoneville Street in Cheltenham, that dictated the focus of the enquiry. By the end of this initial research phase we were confident that we would be able to produce an engaging unit of work rich in learning potential. We had found our 'one day': the bombing of Stoneville Street on 11 December 1940.

We then embarked on the search for as many primary sources as possible, for example a Digimaps resource, material on a genealogy website (Gloucestershire Genealogy), and a detailed account of a raid in a local history book (Lewis-Jones, 2009). We rejected many sources that, while interesting, did not quite serve our purpose, settling on those that worked well together and would have the most significant impact on children's learning.These finds enabled us to plan a unit of work, the aim of which was for children to behave like historians and investigate an aspect of local history by exploring what happened on one particular day.

As planned, in lessons the children used primary sources (photographs, maps, a memorial) to develop an understanding of the impact of a single bomb falling on a single street in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire. To make the enquiry authentic and to promote problem solving, the children were ultimately asked to use the full range of sources to work out exactly where the bomb fell in the street. Careful thought was given to the sequencing of sources and key activities in order to scaffold the problem-solving process. In this way children's engagement was maintained as the mystery unfolded.

To inspire curiosity, we began by providing a photograph as a 'hook' for learning (Figure 1). Working on the principle that we wanted to ensure that children looked carefully at the image before going on to make deductions and inferences, we began by asking the class to describe what they could see. This provided opportunities for us to extend period-specific vocabulary and practise picture reading skills.The children identified the demolished building, the mound of earth and the individual in uniform, then spontaneously concluded that the photograph was taken during World War II and that a bomb had caused the damage. Detailed questioning was important at this point to ensure that children were able to evaluate the evidence. Questions like 'What has happened?', 'Where exactly did the bomb fall?' and 'How do you know?' helped them to form and justify their opinions.

Figure 1: Enormous crater in a Christ Church Road garden where a bomb on 11 December 1940 partly destroyed the house
Cheltenham Local and Family History Library, CW/Box N/PR110.22

Having revealed that the bomb had fallen 100 metres from the school in 1940, we moved from depth to overview to help children understand the broader context. We set the individual event within the framework of knowledge and understanding of the Second World War by using a timeline. In this way, pupils were able to establish that the bombing raid in Cheltenham occurred near the beginning of the war, about eighty years ago. This was an opportunity for us to provide some 'enabling knowledge' about bombing raids at this point in time. It was important at this stage, when the learning was heavily scaffolded, to ensure that children had sufficient knowledge and understanding of this context to apply to the later enquiry.

Only once we had laid the foundations for the children's enquiry did we introduce the key questions that led the unit: **What happened in Cheltenham on 11 December 1940? How were the lives of people in Cheltenham affected by this event?**

We explained to the class that in order to answer questions historians need to examine evidence from the past. Children then worked collaboratively in small groups to examine a collection of primary sources which were introduced to them in a very particular order

Figure 2: Morning after the raid in Stoneville Street, 11 December 1940 – one of the residents (Mrs Meredith) sits outside her house with what furniture and belongings she has been able to salvage. A soldier in battledress and tin hat looks on.
Cheltenham Local and Family History Library, CW/Box N/PR110

Examples of prompts to accompany Figure 2.

- What has happened to Mrs Meredith's house?
- Is the damage superficial or structural? Is there a danger the house will collapse? What makes you think that?
- What do you think Mrs Meredith was doing just before this photograph was taken?
- Did she have help to remove her belongings? What makes you think that?
- What has she salvaged?
- Why do you think she has chosen to save these belongings?
- How do you think Mrs Meredith is feeling? Can you convince me?
- Is she being looked after? How do you know?
- What do you think happened immediately after this photograph was taken?

to build their knowledge and understanding incrementally.They started with a photograph of a memorial to civilians who had died on 11 December 1940, alongside a document listing names and ages of the casualties and place of death. Children were given a specific task: to look for patterns in the evidence and then to report what they had found. They spotted the repeated appearance of some addresses and of surnames, enabling them to identify families and where they lived, and that one bomb had resulted in several fatalities in one particular street. This narrowed the focus of the enquiry to Stoneville Street. As with any productive enquiry, this created a 'need to know': the children were now eager to find out where the street was and more details about what had happened.

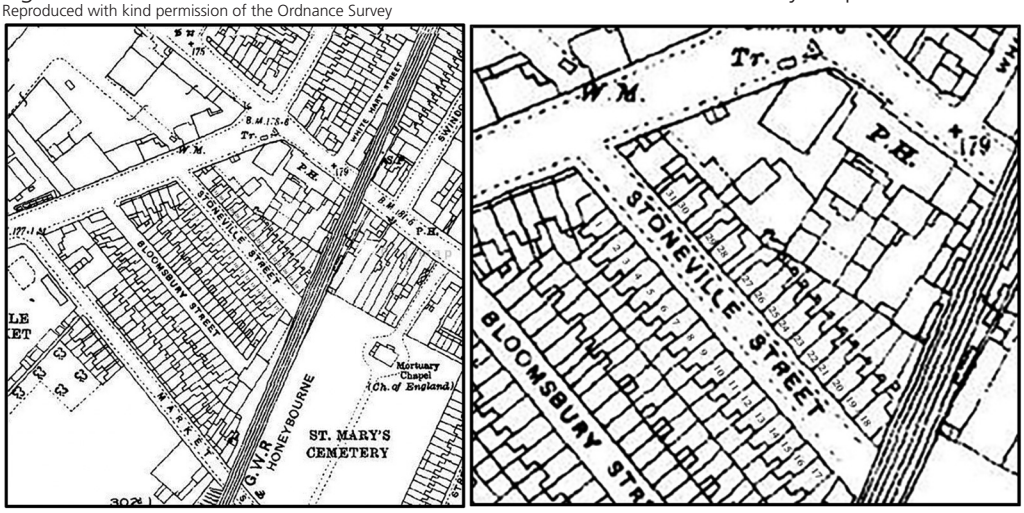
Using a combination of maps, aerial photographs and Google Street View the children located the street and identified two parallel rows of Victorian terraced housing, bordered at one end by the railway and at the other by the gas works (where a superstore is now located). The children then 'visited' Stoneville Street in 1940 by examining photographs from the local newspaper showing the street the day after the raid (Figures 2 & 3).They noted that some houses had been totally destroyed, while others were largely intact. This rich resource prompted lots of discussion about the damage caused by the bomb and the impact on local residents. The children expressed empathy as they examined images of people made homeless by the raids. They considered what people might have removed from the damaged buildings and the roles of individuals in uniform.

The sources and tasks so far had given the children knowledge and understanding of the context, of the location and the impact of the bomb. We then wanted them to solve a problem and presented them with a challenge: Where did the bomb land in the street? This could not be solved without all of

Figure 3: Telling their stories to an *Echo* reporter in Stoneville Street, 11 December 1940. Four people in the photograph have been named – Mr and Mrs Atkins, Marian Atkins, and Bill Western.
Cheltenham Local and Family History Library, CW/Box N/PR110.14

the information they had gathered so far. To support this final enquiry, children were given pictures of Stoneville Street today and a period map of the street with house numbers added (Figure 4).They were asked to work out and show where the bomb landed in the street on the map and justify their decision, using the primary sources they had been given.

Figure 4: Detail from 1946 Cheltenham and Evesham Ordnance Survey Map
Reproduced with kind permission of the Ordnance Survey



We were ready to offer structured support at this point, but in fact most children responded very positively to this open-ended, problem-solving task and were eager to piece together the clues. Children who rushed to guess a location on their map were reminded that their decision should be evidence-based. As a first step they were encouraged to mark the information they had gathered from the sources onto the map. The children identified where the people who died in Stoneville Street had lived, they used the photographs to colour code the map showing the extent of the bomb damage and annotated the source with inferences they had made. Real detective work was needed to identify the house numbers of buildings shown in the photographs and involved matching old and new pictures, counting chimney pots and doors and using Google Street View to check their ideas.This problem provoked much discussion and interrogation of the primary sources. Most children correctly reasoned that the bomb was likely to have fallen in the road near the railway embankment.

This enquiry undoubtedly worked because the children were motivated and engaged to solve the mystery and because the learning was carefully scaffolded. The problem triggered higher-order thinking skills: the children weighed up the evidence, supported inferences with reference to the primary sources and justified their final decisions. Analysis of the modern photographs enabled them to work out what happened next. They could see that rubble

was cleared and that several of the houses that appeared to have superficial damage had,in fact, been demolished and rebuilt. Their natural reaction was to wonder what had happened to the families that had lived in these houses and other people who lived in Cheltenham during the war. As planned, this depth enquiry was then the springboard for children to ask and answer more questions about the town and national context at this time. For example, the children wanted to know why the bombs had been dropped on the town and whether Stoneville Street, with its proximity to the railway and the gas works, had been specifically targeted. The power of the narrative was that it 'inspired pupils' curiosity' (DfE, 2013, p.188). In the following lessons, children gained a broader contextual understanding, building on their developing knowledge, making links between the specific and the general.

Implications for planning a local study

- Do less better: it is often better to restrict the scope of a local history unit of work.
- Be open to possibilities and be led by the resources.
- Locate 'families' of resources that you can use in conjunction with one another.
- Relate what was happening in the local area to what was happening nationally and internationally. Make sure you establish a context in time and place for your depth study.
- Present children with a genuine enquiry and real problem-solving opportunities. This is motivating for children, allows you to raise the level of challenge and encourages independence.
- Give children the time and space to solve the problem and provide opportunities for children to develop higher-order thinking.
- Think carefully about the order in which the primary sources are revealed to the children; the sequence is important. Those sources introduced at the beginning of a lesson/unit should provide children with the foundations of knowledge they need in order to rise to later challenges.
- Children have no difficulty working simultaneously with several sources. In this case, they were even better at making links between sources than we had anticipated.
- To do this well takes time.

If we give children the opportunity to take their time, work with rich resources and support their learning in a structured way, they will rise to the challenge and often surprise us in what they can achieve. Studying 'one day' enables us to do just this while at the same time making the task of planning and resourcing both more manageable and more rewarding. It is time to delve into the stories of people, events and places in the local community and prepare to be enthralled by what you and the children can learn. Be inspired by what you find in the streets you walk every day.

Examples of 'one day' in and around Cheltenham:

23 September 1776: Katherine A'Court was poisoned with arsenic by a footman, Joseph Armstrong, who had been accused of stealing his mistress's valuables. There remains some mystery around the events of her death. (Starting point: a gravestone in St Mary's Church.)

3 October 1838: John Hampton rose from Montpellier Gardens in a hot air balloon to make the first successful British parachute descent. (Starting point: a plaque commemorating the event on a bandstand.)

16 March 1934: Three elephants from Chapman's London Zoo Circus were parading through the streets of Cheltenham. Having scented animal feed, they entered Bloodworth's Seed Merchants and Pet Shop for a snack. (Starting point: a mural hidden on an alley wall.)

What can you find in your local area? Look out for ...

a disaster
a crime
a march
a festival
a celebration
a homecoming
a launch
a first
an opening / closure
a sporting event
a parade, fair, circus
a birth / a death / a marriage
an act of bravery
and much more

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Resources

Department for Education (DfE) (2013) *The national curriculum in England: Key stages 1 and 2 framework document.* Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/425601/PRIMARY_national_curriculum.pdf

Gloucestershire Genealogy (No Date) *Cheltenham Civilian Role of Honour.* Available at: www.glosgen.co.uk/warmem/cheltcivilianswm.htm

Lewis-Jones, J. (2009) *The Cotswolds at War,* Stroud: Amberley Publishing.