

What's in a road?

Local history at Early Years and Key Stage 1

Susie Townsend

One of the many amazing things about History is that it can be found in everything; even the smallest or most mundane objects can provide an insight into how life has changed or provide a greater understanding of a different period in time.

Late October last year as the light was fading, I was pacing along my road, phone in hand, taking photos of objects on the street from unusual angles. The results were at times obscure and resulted in some curious glances from neighbours when they saw me crouching by the side of the road or taking picture of a dog 'poo' bin!

However, the photos surprised me in the way that they showed so much about changes in the way we have lived over the past few decades. It seemed that this could be an excellent way to introduce local history to very young children and provide a reference for future work on themes within living memory. It also would encourage children to develop questioning through enquiry-based learning and observational skills.

These images give an indication of some of the pictures taken. Included were a post box, telephone box, IT box and school intercom; utilities, such as fire hydrant signs and drain covers; a bus stop, bus shelter, train signal, zebra crossing with Belisha beacon, and other items such as the aforementioned 'poo' bin, general bin, village pond, stained glass chapel window and blister tactile paving. Some of these are shown in this article so see if you can work them out! I could have added more personal ones from my village such as the war memorial or the millstones which are the village symbol or could have considered the history of some of



the road names, but I wanted to show how even very generic objects can be of interest.

The pictures are taken at unusual angles to encourage children to look closely and could be just printed in black and white if you want to make it a harder challenge. They are often a little blurred so that the children have to hypothesise and interpret the images. If you did the latter this could lead to discussion about what clues are needed to identify artefacts, such as the size, colour and location.

How could you use your road with Early Years children?

Pictures like these could be used in several ways. They could be introduced in the classroom and children could guess what they think they are and then they could walk along the street and see if they could find them. Were their predictions correct? Activities such as these encourage children to look at the details; what are they made of, was there any writing on them, do they have ideas about what they are and how they might be used?

Alternatively, children could be shown two or three images to ask questions about, discuss and guess what they are and then they could go out and take their own mystery pictures for their friends to identify using Ipads. To do an activity like this it is important to make sure they understand that it is only hand-built items they are investigating. This will help reinforce the idea that history is about people in the past and the artefacts that they have made.

Back in the classroom children could group the pictures and justify their groupings. This in turn could lead to a recognition of themes, such as communication, technology, transport and water. There is a whole world under our streets and they will hopefully start to think about where the water in our tap comes from, where waste water disappears and how electricity gets into our homes. There is even the history of waste that could be explored linking from the bin in the road (which was first decreed compulsory in 1884 in France by Eugene Poubelle) to the recycling centres today.

In this way a study of the road could lead into a theme within living memory – one of the Key Stage One units – but this could be initiated in Early Years as well and then built on with older children.



Past and present ELG

Children at the expected level of development will:

Talk about the lives of the people around them and their roles in society;

Know some similarities and differences between things in the past and now, drawing on their experiences and what has been read in class;

Understand the past through settings, characters and events encountered in books read in class and storytelling;

You could create a rotating wheel with pictures of different people from the community – such as a police officer, postal worker, fire-fighter or train driver so that children can spin the wheel to see who their character is for the day and act out their roles in the role-play area. With this understanding of what the roles of these people are today children will find it easier to see how their roles have changed over time.

A study of individual pictures can now start to reveal how life has changed on the road and can lead into a broader investigation of these themes. For example, many roads will still have telephone boxes, but with the advent of mobile phones children will probably never have been in one. They may be used in a different way now – I have seen them used as library, a flower display and even as a place to keep a defibrillator. Why do they think the telephone box is still there? Children could design their own telephone box and how and why they would like to use it.

In the same way few of them will have posted a letter or postcard in a post box, again showing the impact of the Internet on communication.

The fire hydrant signs show different numbers on them; the top number is the size of the mains pipe and the lower number is the distance of the sign from the water point. But the numbers are different here as one is in imperial and the other in metric, showing the change to the metric system.





The Past and Present early learning goals stress the importance of talking about roles in society and this provides an ideal opportunity to invite the Fire Brigade to demonstrate how they use the fire hydrant, the postal worker to explain what their job is today or a local manager of a recycling centre

Developing Ideas

From this point onwards there are so many different ways that this topic can develop and some examples of how this can be done in Early Years and at Key Stage One are outlined in the centre-page spread. Some of these ideas can be just discussions, some might become projects that continue over several weeks depending on interest. There are plenty of opportunities for individual children to make choices about what they want to explore and how they would like to do it. There are also places that they can visit both locally and further afield that can enrich the activities. If the focus is on transport then a study of a local train station would help them understand about their own local history as well as showing them how it links to the national and international picture (Townsend 2018.) Alternatively, moving away from the local lens, museums such as the London Transport Museum, Museum of Transport in York or the Postal Museum in London or Bath are fascinating places to explore.

Focusing on the postal service

It may be that instead of considering a range of themes there is a focus on one, such as the postal service. This could be included in the Local History unit

at Key Stage 1 moving from the local to the national and international dimension.

- The timeline contains just a few events to whet your appetite and you could continue this to the present day. A timeline could go on the wall and then children could add in events about the postal service. At the end you could say that only ten events were going to go on the timeline and get the children to justify which should stay, so that criteria related to significance could start to emerge.
- With younger children you could explore the changes to uniform and what that can reveal about changing materials and attitudes. One way to start this could be to take the picture of the first uniform and play a game of Whose Uniform with pictures of a soldier, a prince, a modern postal worker, a modern firefighter and a modern police officer, for them to decide who to match it with and why.
- There could then be a fashion parade of paper dolls with postal uniforms through time for them to put in order.
- Older children could create in pictures and/or words, the journey a letter takes today – from writing to receiving. Drama can be very effective in making the learning memorable and different children could take on the various stages of the journey. They could then look back in time to see how delivery of the mail has changed.

A brief timeline of the postal service 1516–1940

- **1516** Henry VII created the role 'Master of the Posts', whose job was to send messages between members of the government.
- **1635** Charles I made the postal service available to the public, with the cost of postage being paid by the person who received it.
- **1660** Charles II established the General Post Office.
- **1661** The postage date stamp was first used, and the first Postmaster General was appointed.
- **1784** The first mail coach was introduced between Bristol and London. Early mail coaches were similar to ordinary family carriages but bore the Post Office livery.
- **1830** The first mail train on the Liverpool to Manchester Railway made its deliveries.
- **1837** Rowland Hill, a schoolmaster from Birmingham, invented the adhesive postage stamp.
- **1840** The first adhesive postage stamp, the Penny Black was released.
- **1852** The first pillar box was erected in Jersey.
- **1853** The first post boxes were erected in mainland Britain.
- **1880** Postmen began to use bicycles to deliver the mail.
- **1883** The Parcel post began.
- **1936** The Night Mail movie with poem by W.H. Auden.
- **1940** Postwomen began wearing trousers.

The first postmen were on horseback – they took the bag to the postmaster of an area who kept the post that was for his area while the rest of the post went off to the next area.



Early mail coaches



Royal cyphers



Penny Black stamp

There was even a secret language of stamps where people who wanted to send secret, usually romantic messages tilted the stamp on the envelope in different ways which acted as a code for different messages. Some even wrote tiny messages under the stamp itself.



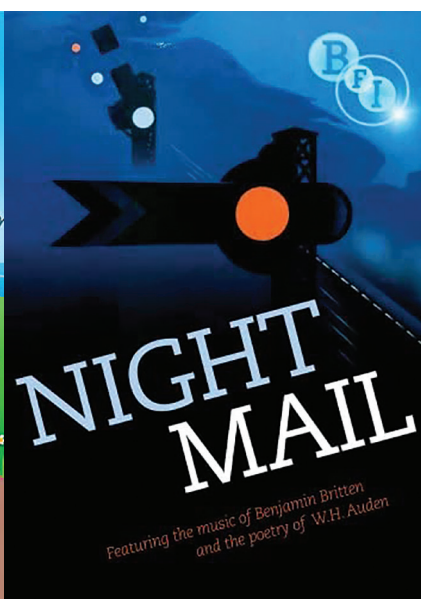
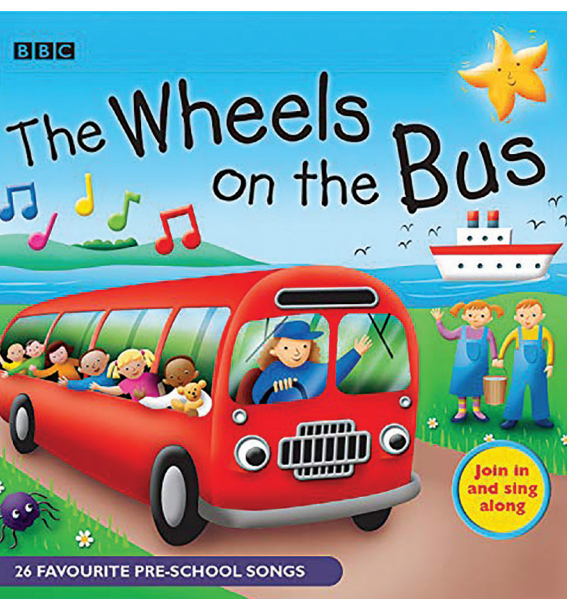
The first boxes were green but they did not stand out in the fog and so were changed to red.

The same design of bicycle for postal workers was used from 1929 to 1992!



Women were not expected to wear trousers.





All of these activities would involve sequencing and so start to build chronological understanding. Children will particularly enjoy looking at the different ways that the mail has been delivered— with younger children you could do this with models and see if they can decide which type of transport would be fastest. Older children could also explore dangers delivering the post and the fear of highwaymen.

Cross-curricular links

There are so many cross-curricular links that can be made. Songs or poems are a great way to link to the story of post, for example, from Postman Pat and the Wheels on the Bus, to readings of the Night Mail by W.H. Auden. There is also the poem set to music by Benjamin Britten as the sound for the 1936 documentary on the Night Mail, which really brings alive the rhythm of the train. Older children could see if they could create their own poem or use musical instruments to make a tune. Or they could perform the original with sound and dance. The story of post also has strong literacy links as children can write a postcard and go to the post office to send it to a relative.

Geographic skills could be reinforced by creating a giant plan of the road, on which the children could try and locate where the original photos were taken. This could then be the centrepiece of a display to show some of the different ways in which they have explored the road. An exploration of rubbish links to geography and sustainability. Science could link to reflection and catseyes and high visibility jackets. If the class were studying fire engines then they could try and make early water squirts or an early model fire engine such as the one restored by the Museum of London using scientific and design-technology skills. There are also many ways in which art could be a focus, such as designing uniforms, creating stamps, designing their own road signs, or creating their own imaginary road.

But above all there is so much history to explore in a simple road.

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Resources

Resource packs from the Postal Museum

www.postalmuseum.org/visit-us/schools/learning-resources/the-jolly-postman/jolly-postman-learning-resource/

www.postalmuseum.org/visit-us/schools/learning-resources/pop-it-in-the-post/

Articles

Sally Scunthorpe, 'Overground, Underground and across the sea' in *Primary History* 76, summer 2017.

Susie Townsend, '"Not again!" An additional viewpoint on using railways' in *Primary History* 76, summer 2017.

Books

The Pilot and the Little Prince by Peter Sis (the story of St Exupery flying the mail)

The Jolly Postman by Allan and Janet Ahlberg

Dragon Post by Emma Yarlett

A Letter to Amy by Ezra Keats