

Artefacts in the neighbourhood

Alf Wilkinson uses an everyday object found near you to develop your children's history skills

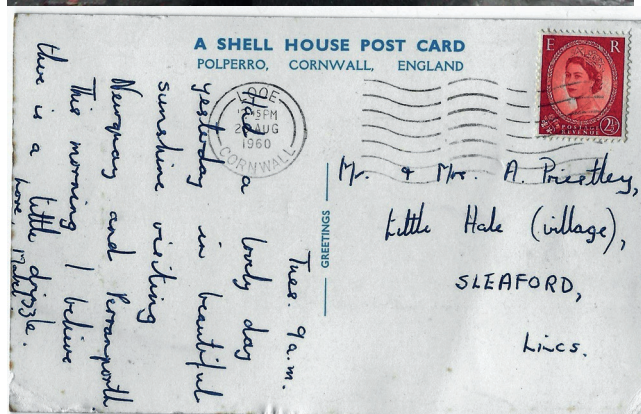


Look carefully at the picture left. It is a familiar object in the neighbourhood. It is a postbox – there will be one (or more) near you. Go out and look carefully at it. What is it? What is it used for? How do we know? Look particularly at the white panel – all postboxes have them. What information can we discover from it? Some questions you can answer – when is the postbox next emptied? Is it the same time every day? When can I post a letter after this box has been emptied? Other questions you might not be able to answer without further research – what happens to the letters when the box is emptied? Where are they sorted? Who empties the box?

Many people today rarely write letters, preferring the speed and cheapness of email. But for some of us of the older generation, post was important. When I was a child few people had telephones, let alone email. The post came twice a day, and was the only way most people kept in touch with each other. In Victorian times it was quite common for a local letter to be delivered within a couple of hours of being posted, and you might receive your reply the very next day!

Using role play to explore the world of the post

You could set up your own postbox in the corner of the classroom, complete with white information panel. Many children will not have written a letter before. Help them to write one. Or you could buy postcards. Persuade the children to write to someone in the class on a different table. Their letter or card might look something like this:



Ask the children to look carefully at the postcard. When was it sent? Who sent it? Who is it addressed to? Where was it sent from? Why might the person who sent it be there? What does it say? Old postcards like these can be bought very cheaply from car boot sales and bookstalls.

Get the children to post their cards in the class postbox. Towards the end of the day arrange for someone to come in and empty the box, just like the postman does, and take away the letters or cards.

Questions to ask an artefact

a) Design and construction

- What is it made of?
- How is it made?
- When was it made?
- Who made it?
- How does it work?
- Does it come apart? How does it go back together?
- Why do you think it was made this way?

c) Value of the object

- Do you think it is valuable?
- Was it valuable when it was made?
- Was it an 'everyday' object?
- Did it make people's lives easier?
- Was it a special object for special occasions?

b) Appearance

- What does it look like?
- What does it feel like?
- Does it smell?
- Is it heavy, or light?
- Has it been used, or is it new?
- Has it been altered, or is it in its original condition?

d) Function

- Why was it made?
- What was it used for?
- Who would have used it?
- Where would they have used it?
- Is it easy or difficult to use?

Next day, get the postman to deliver the cards/letters to your classroom.

NB: You might extend this activity by getting the children to design their own stamp to go on their letter or card. Stamps – as well as banknotes and coins – will be changing in due course, with King Charles instead of Queen Elizabeth appearing on the designs. Even police helmets will have to change! Let the children choose the best design and print them out and sell them to the children!

Similarity and difference – are all postboxes the same?

Similarity and difference is a key history skill for children to develop. We tend to emphasise 'difference' and ignore 'similarity'. In some ways, all postboxes **are** the same – they are all red; they all have slots for post; they all have panels with times and details on. Yet a quick glance at the two photos already used in this article, as well as the postbox your children have visited, will show striking differences. This one is built into a brick wall in the village of Flamborough, in Yorkshire. The top photo is a standalone pillar – much bigger and capable of holding many more letters.

Size will depend on the expected volume of letters to be posted. I'm sure you and our children can spot other differences too.

Using postboxes to develop chronological understanding

On page 31 are some more photos of postboxes. You have probably noticed **one** big difference in the postboxes. They each have a cipher engraved in the design showing who was king or queen when they were made. That can help us work out how old they are. Can you place the postboxes in the correct chronological sequence?

You could use the postboxes as the starting point for a research activity and ask the children what they already know about each monarch, and then ask them to find out more. They could focus on the life of the monarch, or they could, for example, decide what they think was the greatest invention of that reign; or the biggest/best/worst change (a good way to think about continuity and change!)

Watch out for the first Charles III postbox – it is bound to feature in the news!



Linking postbox chronology to their own chronology

Once the children have sorted the postboxes into chronological order you could make a timeline across the classroom wall or floor, or individually for each child. Ask them to mark on the timeline significant dates in ***their own lives***; such as when they were born, when they started school, when their parents and grandparents were born, and so on. This will help them contextualise the changing monarchs [and postbox design] and help them relate things to something they already know.

Who would think that a simple bit of local history – a visit to the nearest postbox – could be a vehicle for developing so many historical skills? Have fun!

Alf Wilkinson taught history for many years and is now retired.

Dates they reigned	Monarch
1837–1901	Victoria
1901–1910	Edward VII
1910–1936	George V
1936	Edward VIII
1936–1952	George VI
1952–2022	Elizabeth II
2022–	Charles III