



What can you do with an old postcard?

Alf Wilkinson

The answer to this question is 'quite a lot, actually.' Whether looking at 'events in living memory' at Key Stage 1, or a local history study at Key Stage 2, old postcards are extremely useful. They are also relatively cheap and easy to get hold of, from car boot sales or charity shops. You don't need to select the expensive 'collectors items', because the postcards you really want are the cheap and cheerful cards that lots of ordinary people sent to each other. It is relatively easy to collect a class set of, for example, seaside holiday postcards.

One aspect that can easily be explored using old postcards is evidence. They are usually relatively easy to date, and are photographs taken at the time. So they are an excellent source of primary evidence of times gone by. They can show buildings, people, street furniture, vehicles and are really useful for developing a sense of period in pupils who sometimes struggle when asked the question what was it *really* like living here a long time ago. And don't forget, postcards can be used to help develop chronological understanding.

If you collect several from one place you can ask the children to sort them into chronological order. But don't forget to ask that most crucial question of all – 'how do we know?'

Key questions to ask of the postcards as evidence include:

- Who took the photographs?
- Who published the postcard?
- Why were the postcards published?
- Why does the postcard show this part of my village/town/city, as opposed to any other part?
- Can we really trust the evidence?
- Is it primary evidence, or secondary evidence?

I'm sure you can think of many more to ask!

Perhaps you can find some postcards of your local area, like the one above, from my local village in Lincolnshire.



Activity:

- Look closely at this postcard. Can you date it? There are some clues in the picture such as:
- What are the people wearing? What transport can you see? Are there white lines and stop signs on the road surface? What does the shop on the corner sell? What other clues to the date can you find?

Now take a close look at this second postcard taken from nearly the same spot.

Was this picture taken before or after the first postcard? How can you tell? What has changed, and what has stayed the same?

You might ask your pupils to complete a simple table like this to help them make sense of any changes: [The first one has been done to help get you started.]

	Stayed the same	changed
The clothes people are wearing		✓



Finally, get the children to look at this photograph taken very recently, in order to bring the changes completely up to date.

Next, why not focus on some of the people in the postcard, for example the two children outside the shop selling ice creams at the crossroads in the second postcard. Let your pupils imagine they could meet them walking down the street. What questions would they like to ask them? Make a class list, and then as a class choose the best five or six to research. Can the children find the answers to their questions? If not, why not? Let the children think about how similar, and how different the lives of those two children would be to their own lives – what clothes do they wear, what would they eat, would they go to school, what do they think the children are looking at in the shop window? Again, make a class poster or 'powerpoint' presentation exploring similarity and difference. I imagine there will probably be more similarities than differences!

You could create a similar activity to this by focusing on the houses, or the transport, or the clothes, or any other aspect of life evident in the postcards. All will help the children to see their local area in a different light, and also to appreciate the similarities as well as the differences between then and now.

Alf Wilkinson is a member of the HA Primary Committee and Editorial Board.



Resources

Many local history societies have selections of old postcards on their websites – just search for 'old postcards' on the internet. But do avoid those sites that are selling!

Examples of useful sites:

www.woodburyhistorysociety.co.uk/old-postcards.html

<http://heddonhistory.weebly.com/blog/old-postcards>

New York Central Library has an article on their website about using old postcards in local history and contains a long list of suggested uses of old postcards:

www.nypl.org/blog/2015/12/04/postcards-local-history-research

Local museums and history societies often sell replicas of old postcards.

Charity shops often have boxes of old postcards for sale; and of course don't forget car boot sales.