

England field trip boosts kids' learning

by George Bennett 4th-6th Teacher and School Trip Guide

On Valentine's Day this year, a group of forty children and parents from the Village School, an independent elementary school in Royalston, boarded a plane from Boston to London to begin a week-long field-trip to England and Wales. The expedition was part of the 4th-6th grade class's year-long study of the Middle Ages, and grew out of the school's philosophy that academic learning is reinforced and broadened with the support of well-designed field trips.

At the Village School, field trips support almost every subject, and give children first-hand experiences which cannot be replicated in the classroom. As part of science lessons, for example, children of every age make regular trips outside the school to study forests and life in ponds or streams, and to count species of flora and fauna as part of the annual Biodiversity Day.

In art, when children visit art museums to see original paintings for themselves, they are excited to see the actual paintings they have studied as posters, and the experience greatly enriches their understanding of paintings in general, and their own art in particular.

The 2nd-3rd class tours sites such as the fishing port of Gloucester and Old Sturbridge Village as part of its year-long study of Colonial America. When the class's theme for the year is Native Americans, students travel to Connecticut to visit the Pequot Museum. So the 4th-6th grade 'England Trip', as it is known by everybody at the school, is part of a school-wide series of field trips, albeit a rather more lengthy and complex undertaking than the others.

The Middle Ages is one of a cycle of three year-long themes studied by the combined three-grade class at the Village School, and it covers a wide variety of topics, including everyday life under the feudal system, major events such as the Crusades and the Black Death, and, of course, knights and castles. The idea of visiting actual castles was first proposed back in 2005, and since then the school has made five successful tours of castles, cathedrals and other medieval sites in England and Wales.

To keep costs down, participants share dormitories in youth hostels, and while there is some fund-raising, families have years of advance warning about the field trip, and so are able to save money towards it. Some financial support is available where necessary, so that in five trips, no child has been prevented by financial reasons from taking part.

The itinerary begins in London, with a tour of some famous sites in the center of the city, including the London Eye observation wheel, the Houses of Parliament and Trafalgar Square, home of the National Gallery. Here, in one of the world's premier art museums, the children can stand in front of many of the paintings they've studied in school, as part of the Painting of the Week program featured in a recent *Gardner News* article.

The trip also includes a river cruise to the Tower of London. The children learn in the classroom how the original Tower was built by William I back in the eleventh century, as part of the Norman conquest of Anglo-Saxon England, and now they have a chance to explore the castle itself, and to walk along the extra encircling walls, and through the towers, that were built by later kings.

After two nights in London, the group travels westward to visit Stonehenge – not a medieval structure, of course, but well worth visiting – and the magnificent 13th century cathedral at Salisbury. The children take a guided tour of the cathedral and then attend the Evensong service, so that they hear for themselves how the soaring acoustics of the cathedral enhance and amplify the sound of the cathedral choir, something no book can adequately describe.

The cathedral also houses the best of the four surviving copies of Magna Carta – or great charter - the agreement signed by King John in 1215 that defined and limited the powers of the monarch, and that is still used as a precedent in American law. And although the class has studied the outlines of the charter, it's impressive to see the actual document, complete with the king's seal, for themselves.

Apart from the Tower of London, the class visits two other castles in the following days, Caerphilly, the largest of the many great castles built by the English as part of their conquest of Wales, and Chepstow, built to control an important river crossing between the two countries in medieval times.

The children see for themselves what these great castles were like as places to live, and they discover details that are difficult, if not impossible, to convey in the classroom. For example, they discover that staircases in castle towers spiraled upward to the right. This meant that an attacker's sword arm (nearly always his right arm) was cramped against the central spine of the spiral, while the defender, facing down, had much more room to move.

To prove the point, a number of children try swinging their right arm (usually with a wooden sword bought from the castle gift-shop) as they 'attack' a tower, and find that the defender does indeed have an advantage.

Standing at the top of a wall at Caerphilly castle, and looking out over the moat, students gain a clear understanding of just what was required to attack such an impregnable fortress – in full armor – so they can appreciate why castles were more often defeated by siege and starvation than they were by direct assault.

Between the castle explorations, the group also visits the magnificent ruins of Tintern Abbey, a Cistercian monastery founded in the 12th century by the lord of Chepstow castle, and allowed to fall into disrepair following the closure of the monasteries by Henry VIII, some four hundred years later. Although the walls of the huge abbey church survive, the roof and windows have gone, but the ruins of the church and the surrounding monastic buildings still make a surprisingly strong impression on the children.

One highlight of the week is the night the group spends in the youth hostel at St Briavels, on the Welsh border, which is a small 13th-century castle, complete with a jail that's now a dormitory. The evening includes a medieval banquet, in which the children eat a thick soup, meat and vegetables, all without the help of spoons or forks, which were not used – even in polite society - when the castle was originally built.

This year's itinerary also included a performance of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* at Stratford-upon-Avon, the playwright's birthplace. This was a rare opportunity for the children to see theater of the highest quality, and the class had studied the play beforehand so as to make the most of the evening.

The rich variety of students' experiences on the England trip is reflected in the children's subsequent discussions of medieval topics when they return to the classroom. Each year that the school has made the trip to England, it has been fully justified in terms of the children's experience-based understanding of what they have learned in theory in the classroom, something that all the school's field-trips have in common.