

# NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



## THE SUTTON HOO TREASURES

### TEACHERS' NOTES

I teach a Year 4 class in a large suburban primary school. The pupils had been studying the Anglo-Saxons for a few weeks and were very enthusiastic. They had looked at photographs of the Sutton Hoo remains the previous week and had some knowledge of the work of archaeologists from studying photographs and reading about how the burial ship had been discovered and excavated.

This week the focus of the lesson was how archaeologists have to describe their finds and catalogue them. I wanted to develop the children's language skills by asking them to describe the artefacts in as much detail as they could. Large coloured photographs of the Sutton Hoo treasures were used.

Class discussion prepared the children for producing their own report on a chosen artefact.

#### **Year group/class**

Year 4 class, mixed ability and gender.

#### **Teaching time**

One and a half hours.

#### **Learning objectives**

- To understand the importance of close observation in archaeology.
- To develop language skills through discussion and descriptive writing.

## Key questions

What kinds of things would you expect archaeologists to find at Sutton Hoo?

Why is it important to describe objects precisely?

## Resources

A4 photographs of the Sutton Hoo treasures.  
 (Postcards of the treasure items are obtainable from the British Museum. The British Museum's website also contains good pictures of, and information about, the treasures. Start at:  
<http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/compass>  
 or see  
<http://csis.pace.edu/grendel/projs4a/sutton.htm> )

## The teaching

Discussion of the work carried out by archaeologists, studying photographs and describing the artefacts, suggesting the purpose of various artefacts, producing a written description of one of the artefacts.

### Episode 1

*Focus: To share ideas about what could be found at burial sites.*

The mystery of the missing body was debated in detail the previous week. This week I wanted children to feel the excitement of discovering the treasures. So I asked the pupils:

- What sort of things would you expect to find buried at Sutton Hoo?
- Why did people bury things?
- What things would have survived?

### Episode 2

*Focus: Discussing with a partner the set of photographs presented.*

Pupils were asked to study a photograph with their partner and think about the following:

- What is it?
- What is it made of?
- Has it changed through being buried?
- Would you consider it valuable or useful?
- What could it have been used for? *[continued overleaf]*

Each pair of children studied one photograph and shared their ideas about it with the rest of the class.

Most were very brief and stuck to answering the questions rather than sharing their opinions in flowing prose.

### **Episode 3**

*Focus: Creating word banks for later written reports.*

I asked the children to look at the photograph they had in front of them and decide what sort of words they would need to tell other people about it.

Once they had decided on adjectives we brainstormed ideas, listing them on the board.

### **Episode 4**

*Focus: Creating a word picture of their artefact.*

We discussed why archaeologists catalogued their finds and described them. The children decided it was important to say where and when the artefact had been found before describing it. What the object was seemed an important factor to the children, so a lot of them wanted to search topic books to find out more information about the artefact.

Afterwards the children wrote up their descriptions.

### **Episode 5**

*Focus: Report back in a plenary session.*

Some children volunteered to read their reports. I chose a variety of artefacts because so many were keen.

We picked out examples of good vocabulary and sentences from each.

### **Learning outcomes**

- Detailed observation - looking closely at objects.
- Vocabulary - children's vocabulary enhanced.
- Writing skills - children wrote in coherent, logical sentences.

## Reflection/evaluation

The previous lesson the children had been learning about the Sutton Hoo burial site through story and photographs. This lesson was a continuation and the main purpose was to produce a coherent piece of writing using a variety of adjectives, whilst learning something of the work of archaeologists.

The children responded with their usual enthusiasm when discussing what, besides bodies, might have been buried at sites. They came up with some good ideas, some pupils using knowledge acquired at an earlier date.

As usual, the more able produced the most ideas so I had to target specific children to draw them in. It was quite difficult with some children. Many of them found it hard to suggest ideas. I think that they were so used to 'right' or 'wrong' answers that open-ended questions baffled them and made them feel insecure. Georgia, quite a bright girl, was a good example of this attitude and had to be encouraged to believe she could voice an opinion that would not be judged right or wrong.

Once the children understood that there were no right or wrong answers they became quite enthusiastic about the things people would want to bury with them and were able to consider very sensibly the kind of materials that could have survived to this day after being buried.

Working in pairs was quite successful although after a while discussion began to involve the whole group rather than just pairs and it became slightly noisier than I like, albeit a very productive noise.

The presentation in pairs about one of the artefacts was less successful. The naturally good speakers were able to produce confident, coherent accounts of their artefacts and the discussion they'd had with their partner. The linguistically less able children found it hard to string a sentence together and relied heavily on the questions I'd asked them to consider. Their presentation consisted of "It's a helmet. It's made of metal. It's bashed. It is useful. It was used in fighting."

With fewer children speaking it would have been possible to elicit more information through questioning, but I was conscious of time so just allowed each pair to make their presentation and thanked them for their contribution.

Collecting adjectives proved successful. I deliberately asked the less able to contribute first so that they could offer the more obvious adjectives and feel that they had made a valid contribution to the collection. Even so, some surprised me by thinking of words that I didn't expect them to know. Katie suggested 'decorated' and Alex wanted 'sphere'.

The children gave good reasons for the importance of describing finds and cataloging them accurately. They also decided that it was important to state precisely where and when the artefacts had been found. It was interesting to note how many children had begun to lay claim to the artefact they had chosen and speak of it as ‘my artefact’ by this time.

It was not always obvious what the finds were, and the children were anxious to discover what each one was. The shoulder clasps and purse were prime examples. One of the children caused gales of laughter when he suggested that the purse looked a bit like the ‘top of a toilet’. (The cistern)

I decided that they could use the topic books available if they wanted to know more about their artefact. They obviously felt proud of their results judging by the way they were all so eager to read out their descriptions in the plenary.

Some of the children asked if they could write out a fair copy and draw a picture for the display board. Thomas asked if he could change a word because he’d thought of a better one. He changed ‘Some of the patterns had come off’ to ‘Some of the patterns had worn off’. I agreed that it was a much better word, pleased to see evidence of editing in his writing.

This was a successful lesson in terms of encouraging the children to develop their language and writing skills, but I think I became engrossed in the literacy side of things and possibly neglected the history element. Afterwards I thought I could have developed the history aspect by moving on to what we could learn about Anglo-Saxon society from the artefacts.

An unexpected bonus from the lesson was the desire of many children to find out more about the artefacts from written sources, in this case topic books. They scoured through texts searching for information which they were able to include in their writing, particularly those who weren’t sure what their artefact actually was. One little girl found out her artefact was a cooking pot but could I please tell her how to say the word. (It was cauldron.) My role had changed from teacher to reader and adviser at this point.

A number of children moved beyond simple observations to make inferences about the object they had found. Thomas: “I think the snake head (on the helmet) is a demon they followed.” Jane: “Whoever this purse belonged to it looks like they took good care of it.”

Using pictures has proved a valuable addition to conventional language teaching. It is less threatening for poorer readers and builds on the children’s interest in visual images. The detailed observation required in

studying the photographs cascaded into other areas of the curriculum, and I found that some of the discussions in the literacy hour and science lessons were for more focused than previously.

Everyone was fully engaged and enjoying the feeling of success the task generated. I'm looking forward to trying out more of what I've learned on the Nuffield Literacy and History course.

**Nuffield Primary History project**

**General editors:** Jacqui Dean and Jon Nichol

**Author of this unit:** Jacqueline Chapman

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