



INVESTIGATING TWO MINING DISASTERS

VICTORIAN BRITAIN

Teachers' notes

My class of Year 6 children had studied aspects of Victorian Britain, including child labour in the cotton industry. In September, as an introduction to the period, we visited the Black Country Museum in Dudley, which included a trip down a Victorian coal mine.

(See <http://www.bclm.co.uk/>)

In the series of lessons about two mining disasters, I integrated learning in history, literacy and ICT. As the children are an able group, I intended to challenge them to explore primary written sources, to identify differences between them, to reconstruct family groupings affected by the second disaster, to give dramatic interpretations of the historical event described, and finally to write with both feeling and accuracy about it.

Year group/class and teaching time

Year 6, 30 pupils (18 girls, 12 boys)

Time: 4 one-hour periods.

Learning objectives

History For the children to:

- understand the effects of a mining disaster in Victorian Britain
- demonstrate empathy with the people involved.

Literacy For the children to:

- explore and compare a range of reports on a specific event
- use drama to explore feelings
- write their own song/poem in the style of a folk song
- gain understanding of the language of non-fiction texts.(NLS Y6 13)
- read and understand examples of official language (NLS Y6 17).

ICT For the children to

- interrogate a database efficiently for specific information.

Key questions

How can we find out what happened in the disasters?

What was it like for the people involved?

Resources

Recording of the song *The Blantyre Explosion* by Ewan MacColl (see <http://www.mysongbook.de/msb/songs/b/blantyre.html>)

Class copies of the words of the song

Class copies of three contemporary accounts of the Blantyre Explosion of 1877, downloadable from www.primaryhistory.org:

- The Story of the Explosion, by the Rev. S. Wright
- Report by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Mines
- 'Awful Calamity at Blantyre', report in local newspaper

Two comparison tables for the children to fill in, one per pupil:

Sources comparison table: the Blantyre explosion

The sources: Questions an historian might ask

Computer database of deaths in the Felling disaster of 1812. The information needed for constructing the database is on the Durham Mining Museum website: www.dmm.org.uk/colliery/f002.htm.

The website contains a description of the disaster, and the names, ages and jobs of those who died, together with their dates of burial.

Here is a corresponding list of names of those killed in the Blantyre disaster. <http://www.dmm.org.uk/names/d1870-79.htm>

Software: Information Workshop database program (available from BlackCat publishers). Other database programs could also be used.

The teaching: Lesson 1 'The Blantyre explosion'

Episode 1

Focus: The explosion – reacting to a song about the disaster.

Children were to list questions which are unanswered by the song – brainstorm as a group.

We began by discussing the verbal tradition of storytelling, through song as well as by telling a story. The children listened to the recording of Ewan MacColl's song: *The Blantyre Explosion*, then gave their initial ideas about the information it contained and about the mood of the song.

I now gave copies of the words to the children and played the song again. Afterwards we went through:

- vocabulary children did not understand – e.g 'bonny', 'pit-heaps' and 'shed a tear';
- the scanty information in the song about the explosion. We speculated about why it does not contain a great deal of information about the actual disaster.

Episode 2

Focus: Tableaux – snapshots of the disaster.

The children in small groups then produced some tableau scenes from the song. Most chose obvious lines to do with grief and they did well, although it was their first experience of tackling such an activity. I now need to try it with a text offering a greater range of opportunities.

Episode 3

Focus: Acting as historians – asking historical questions.

I then asked the children to act as historians. We brainstormed a list of questions they would expect historians to ask about the explosion if they had found the song.

The questions included:

Did it actually happen?

Where?

When? (popular question)

What caused the explosion? (most popular question)

How much damage was caused?

Did people do anything about it?

How did the village survive afterwards?

How long did the disaster last?

How many died/children? (popular question)

Did Johnny Murphy exist?

Did any survive?

Background to the disaster?

We then discussed where, as historians, the children might find the answers. In this episode the children found asking questions difficult, but I was pleased with their responses to the discussion that followed – they have a good grasp of the idea of first-hand sources. I then said that several sources had survived, and introduced the next episode.

Episode 4

Focus: Reading primary sources and identifying the facts.

I gave out copies of the three accounts of the Blantyre explosion (by the parish priest, the inspectors of mines, and the local newspaper). Three good readers each read one text aloud to the class, and I explained the vocabulary as we went along.

In pairs, the children started to complete the sources comparison table. They only had time to fill in the Facts section before break. (I should have used highlighter pens at this stage; this would have made the task easier for the children.) We continued the lesson for twenty minutes after break.

Episode 5

Focus: Using the table to sort out ideas; writing reports for a history book.

I returned to class with highlighter pens and we highlighted the facts included in each source, including the song. We also discussed differences in the amount and type of information each source contained.

Continuing in role as historians, the children used the information highlighted to write reports for a history book about the disaster. We discussed the facts they needed to include, and how they might deal with conflicting information, e.g. the number killed in the disaster.

Lesson 2 'The Felling disaster'

Episode 1

Focus: Storytelling – the Felling disaster

I told the children the story of the Felling disaster: how there was an explosion when two shifts were underground and how, to save the coal – which was on fire – the owners closed off the pit, sealing it so air could not enter. (Cutting off the air supply would put out the flames.) The pit was re-opened days later and the dead were recovered and buried.

The children responded thoughtfully. They were obviously affected by the story and questioned the thinking of the people concerned, particularly the actions of the mine owner.

Episode 2

Focus: Using a database to investigate family groupings at Felling.

I introduced the class to the Felling database and explained the information contained in the different fields. The children were each given a family name from the Felling datafile to investigate. They used the Information Workshop software efficiently to find the information and began thinking about possible family groupings. For example, the four Bainbridges listed were probably a father (aged 53) and his three sons (aged 10, 17 and 19).

The children then wrote pen pictures of their families following discussion of the jobs and the ages of the people concerned. I was pleased with the standard of these as they covered whole family groupings.

Lesson 3 'Felling families'

Episode 1

Focus: Drama – developing an understanding of the individual families.

The children adopted the family names they had investigated, to form family groups. Each child became one member of a family living in the village at the time of the explosion.

I now introduced the drama, which lasted about 45 minutes. The children were told to respond in role to news as it arrived. We went through the following sequence of events:

The families are in the village just before 11.30am. Act out what they are doing. (The children set the scene for the period just before the explosion, carrying out the jobs and tasks which they thought would be going on in the village.)

At 11.30am they hear an explosion. What do they do? How do they react? (They froze while I read an account of the explosion and then they reacted, rushing up to the mine and milling around.)

The next day, at the mine: I am the mine owner. I announce the names of 30 survivors. (The children reacted with relief at the news of some survivors.)

Nobody can go down to attempt rescue. (The children reacted with shock and horror to this news.)

Tell them that I need to seal off the pit and block all the air out to extinguish the fire. (Definite anger and hostility towards me, shouting at me and accusing me of being uncaring.)

To start with the children found the drama approach new and difficult. It took a while to get to the stage where the majority were clearly in role. I drifted in and out of role by putting a cap on when I was the mine owner, and becoming an observer when not wearing it. The children reacted well to this approach, ignoring me when not in role, but some becoming quite aggressive when I was. We finished with the recovery of the first bodies.

The children were generally very involved in the activity. On several occasions, individuals could be seen sitting by themselves reflecting.

Episode 2

Focus: Deepening understanding of the tragedy – exploring feelings.

We discussed the emotions felt by the children during the dramatic re-enactment. I then asked them to make a list of ‘feelings’ words, and discuss in pairs how the words reflected the emotions they themselves had felt.

The activity produced a very impressive list of words describing feelings, some quite complex, like jealousy, envy, resentment.

Next, beside each word on their lists the children identified an event that made them feel like that.

Then they wrote down their feelings towards the Felling mine owner.

The children enjoyed the activity and thought that they now had an understanding of how people had felt, and of the effect that such a disaster might have had on the village.

Lesson 4 ‘Identifying and communicating understanding’

Episode 1

Focus: The Blantyre Explosion song – feelings and comparisons.

We listened again to *The Blantyre Explosion* song and identified and discussed the feelings involved. We compared them with the feelings in the children’s lists from Lesson 3.

We also discussed the structure of the two songs and how they might have been written.

Episode 2

Focus: Pupils write their own poems/songs.

The children then set about writing their own poems telling the story of the Felling disaster. They spent a considerable amount of time drafting the poems and writing them out. I worked with the less able children to model an example with them.

The children finished off their poems and we had time for some to read and/or perform them to the rest of the class. A few children actually sang their poems, using the Ewan MacColl tune.

Learning outcomes

I assessed the children's learning through noting, observing and marking their:

- discussion of the different texts
- demonstration in the dramatic re-enactment of understanding of the feelings of the villagers
- production of writing in the style of the texts investigated.

The children:

- engaged with the story of the Blantyre explosion and acted as historians, asking relevant questions and following through a line of enquiry
- were able to make critical use of first hand sources, identifying the differences between them and understanding the reasons for this
- completed a report on the Blantyre explosion using the first hand accounts
- used a computer database effectively to investigate families who had died in the Felling Mining disaster, and wrote potted family biographies
- created a dramatic re-enactment to explore the emotions of people involved in the disaster, taking the roles of family members of miners who had died
- wrote narrative poems about the Felling disaster, using the Ewan MacColl song as a model
- produced a School assembly on the theme 'Victorian Mining Disasters'.

Evaluation

The family biographies produced by the children were good and provided an entry into the drama activity that followed. This preliminary research was needed in order for the children to be able to role-play their characters convincingly. The drama was a powerful tool for exploring the feelings involved, and I was impressed by the way the children responded to the activity. They listened, interacted with each other and the mine owner, and were able to discuss their feelings afterwards. They

made use of this discussion to explore the feelings of the miners' families.

I was very pleased with the final work produced – a range of thought-provoking poems with good narrative structure, in which the children demonstrated an appreciation of the feelings of the people involved. Some were angry, some sad. The work of the less able children was of a much better standard than I had expected. I think a teacher with greater singing skills would be able to help many of the children turn them into songs. At the assembly one group of boys and one group of girls did sing two of the poems unaccompanied.

Learning points for me (the teacher)

To link the primary sources better with the questions the children asked, I would change the questions table to allow them to list the questions and identify the source(s) in which the answer to each question can be found.

I needed to model report-writing (Lesson 1) for the majority of the children. Whilst most contained the facts, many were not concise and others omitted relevant details.

Nuffield Primary History project

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