

RIVERS IN REVERSE

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Here, Alison showcases some extremely creative enquiry-based geography inspired by a local news story.

We all have places of significance in our lives, especially from childhood, that evoke memories and shape us. As Catling states, places have: 'meaning for us; they are where we are, not just where we reside or go to school, to play or to work, but where we feel either "at home" or "out of place"'. We relate to places, and this relationship is a key element of our personal identity' (Catling, 2010).

For the pupils of St Charles' Catholic Primary (a one-form entry school in Liverpool), their school's location on the edge of the inner-city and close to an iconic UK landmark, the River Mersey, shapes their world and how they think about themselves. As a school we believe that 'all pupils have a right to know about their local area, the country they live in and their physical position in the world and that school plays a vital role in ensuring that they have those opportunities through a rich and diverse curriculum' (DfE, 2013).

What's so interesting about a river?

'Year 3: Rivers' it said on the lesson plan. Yes, St Charles' is close to the River Mersey, but could it be assumed that each pupil had visited the river? Or that they have more than a passing interest in its proximity? I needed a hook to catch their imagination and propel them into a determination to find out more about our local river. As Scoffham points out, 'we are all attracted by novelty, and the complaint that something is boring is usually because it is repetitive and lacks challenge' (Scoffham, 2013). Then, late one night in January 2015, it came to me: Dumbledore! No, not he of the Harry Potter wizard fame, but a young common seal who had managed to find his way up the River Mersey and the Sankey Brook, to arrive rather unceremoniously in a field in Newton-le-Willows. (His rescuers, the RSPCA, had named him Dumbledore – see BBC report in web panel – for his amazing ability to get that far inland). Yes, I had to check the map too: Newton-le-Willows lies approximately 32km to the east of Liverpool and 12km north of the River Mersey. For my year 3 pupils, it was a gift. What could be more exciting than a real 'how did he get there?' scenario?

And not just the joy of solving a mystery, but also to have a cute seal with such baleful eyes as the hook – fantastic! Thus, the idea for 'Journey along the River Mersey' was born: using the 'Dumbledore the seal' story to enable the pupils to learn about the human and physical geography of the river and involve lots of map work and fieldwork.

What's the question?

As with many foundation subjects, our first lesson started with the pupils devising their own questions, these included: Where does the river start? Where does it end? What creatures live in it? How do you cross it? How wide is it? Who uses it? How deep is it? How long is it? What can you see along the riverbanks?' As Lewis points out, 'this [questioning] is important as it gives [the pupils] a sense of ownership and increases their commitment to the work' (Lewis, 2010). Next, we discussed how we might research these questions and record what we found out.

The pupils enthusiastically worked on several large OS maps (an exciting alternative in this age of technology), searching for landmarks along the River Mersey and noting both human and physical features as they began to find answers to their questions (and generate new ones). As Bridge points out, 'pupils should appreciate that knowing where you are, knowing how your locality relates to the wider area and knowing how it is linked to other places, are desirable life skills' (Bridge, 2010).

Where is Newton-le-Willows?

The first few weeks of the project progressed well, with a focus on the source of the River Mersey and its journey to the Irish Sea. The pupils began to talk with growing confidence about human and geographical features and, most importantly, recognised the direction of the flow. Lewis (2010) reminds us that 'probably the most important single concept in this work is that water flows downhill [and that] many pupils enter secondary school believing that rivers "begin" at the coast and flow inland'. The direction of flow was especially important to establish because the journey that Dumbledore the seal took was in reverse – he swam up river against the current, which might potentially lead to confusion in the pupils' minds.

At last the moment came to share Dumbledore the seal's story. I told the pupils that a seal had been found near the Mersey, but I was not sure if it was true. The incredulous pupils immediately trawled the internet for news. They gave out delightful whoops and gasps as they shared what they found out, but then came the buzz around the classroom: 'Where was Newton-le-Willows?' In a flash pupils were pouring over their OS maps to locate the small town. Next, we discussed how the seal got to Newton-le-Willows, and what it would have passed on its journey. The maps went up on the display board, with a cut-out seal to track Dumbledore's journey along the river.

Fieldwork: down by the river

As interest was running high, the response to a proposed trip to the river was jubilant – we needed more evidence. As Scoffham and Willy (2009) point out, 'A vital motivating factor for primary pupils is gathering material at first hand, through learning outside the classroom'. Out by the River Mersey, we took photographs, drew field maps, logged how the local promenade was used and, naturally, kept a keen look-out for seals. The experience was memorable for all the pupils. As Richardson (2010) reminds us, 'for many pupils a fieldwork visit may be one of the most exciting and memorable events of their lives [and it will help] pupils become more observant, to develop the skills of recording, analysis and deduction'. This was evident in the pupils' work on their field maps, which (after some peer-to-peer discussion) were greatly improved on during a second visit to a different part of the river later in the project. This aspect of the work also provided an excellent form of assessment for learning.

Creative technology

At around this point in the project news filtered into school that the company 'Into Film' was offering free iPad movie-making training for school teachers (see web panel). I signed up: it was too good an offer to pass up because it lent itself completely to a story about a lost seal. Back in the classroom after the training, I shared what I learnt with the pupils, and a storyboard began to emerge with a focus on using accurate geographical language.

The movie opens as a documentary, tracking the River Mersey from its source



The story of a common seal's journey up the River Mersey made for a fun and memorable rivers topic. Photo © Bildagentur Zoonar GmbH/Shutterstock.

to mouth. Individual pupils as narrators recorded their findings about locations along the river and appropriately illustrated their information. A news flash, an interview with the 'local RSPCA inspector', a short re-enactment of Dumbledore the seal being herded by local agencies, and an appearance by a 'Gogglebox' family helped move the story along to its finale starring Dumbledore himself and his 'holiday selfies'.

The iPad movie training included a special 'premiere' screening of 'Journey Along the River Mersey' at FACT in Liverpool. As the lights dimmed and the music began to build, 28 pairs of eyes were glued to the screen. Observing the pupils during this screening was joyous as they sought to recognise each voice, or saw themselves on the big screen. Their comments included: 'I feel like a movie star!' and 'That was boss, Miss!'

If they can explain it, they've understood it

Tanner (2008) believes that 'work in and about the local area validates the pupils' home and neighbourhood as interesting and worthy of study'. Screening the Dumbledore movie in the school assembly a week later, year 3 pupils took pride in where they are from and what they had achieved.

They also answered questions from their peers with growing confidence. The cross-curricular approach and use of technology was a great way to make geography fun and exciting. May the memory of what Dumbledore taught us all never fade.

References

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WEB RESOURCES

BBC report: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-30575560
 Into Film: www.intofilm.org/
 Silver Screen Primary Education:
<https://twitter.com/SilverscreenPri>
 Year 3 Dumbledore movie:
http://stcharlescatholicprimary.com/?page_id=2445

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