‘Living History’ – an opportunity for living science

Rachel Linfield

Rachel finds science rising to the surface from the depths of servant life.

When I was teaching in Cambridge, a favourite annual school visit with my classes of Year 4 and 5 children (ages 8–10) was to Wimpole Hall where we took part in their ‘Living History Project’. Each summer, dressed as servants from the Georgian era, we would spend the day as apprentice housemaids and butlers. On arrival at the hall, we would be greeted by the stern-faced, serious housekeeper and butler, led into the chapel and inspected. Were our hands and nails clean? Had we polished our shoes/boots? Were our clothes appropriate? Even adults tried to fade into the background under the scrutiny of the housekeeper and butler!

Figure 1. Children taken back in time as they take part in living history and gain lots of stimuli for science investigations.

The expectations for our behaviour and work would then be explained. We were told that, if we performed our duties well, there might be a possible job in the future if a position became vacant. From that moment, all children and accompanying adults knew that we had a tiring day ahead where we could not afford to make any mistakes. Everything would be noticed!

Figure 2. Role-playing children ready for work.

Down to work

The morning would be spent discovering the different jobs that, if we were lucky enough to work at Wimpole Hall, might be ours. We learnt how to wait at table, fold napkins, wash clothes, make butter, list ingredients by writing on slates and calculate using ‘old money’. The afternoon involved a guided tour of the upstairs where the duties for upstairs-servants were explained. We rapidly realised that a house that might appear beautiful to a visitor was full of fireplaces, ornaments, paintings, books and furniture that necessitated time-consuming care from servants. The library was always a source of consternation as children became aware of how precious and delicate many of the books were, each one requiring careful handling and dusting. We also realised that only

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servants deemed suitable for ‘upstairs’ would be allowed in the library and that, even if we became servants, we might never earn the right to enter the library again.

The end of the visit was a return to the chapel where the housekeeper and butler would give us a report on our efforts. At this point the children became aware that the butler and housekeeper could, on occasion, smile. We would be thanked for our work and told that, although Wimpole Hall was at present fully staffed, we would be alerted should any positions become vacant.

The majority of children, once on the bus back to school, would inform me that, although they had enjoyed the day, they knew they never wanted to be servants! Many children would later return to the hall with parents/carers to explain a servant’s duties and to visit the notorious library.

Stimuli for science investigations

Not surprisingly, the trips to Wimpole Hall were invaluable for developing knowledge of history. They also, however, were a great stimulus for scientific investigation when back in school. The focus for investigations varied each year, depending on the children, but certain facts always provided excellent starting points.

On each visit, children reacted to the library with horror as they realised the difficulties of keeping books clean. Many questions would arise about dust. Do you know how long dust takes to form on a polished shelf? Have you ever compared dusting with a piece of cloth, a mop, a damp cloth or polish? What is polish?

Have you ever tried to photograph, or record, dust falling back on to a shelf? What is the best way to remove dust from books? Does more dust form on paper-backed or hard-backed books? Do dust jackets work? Does dust form evenly on all books and on all shelves, or are some shelves more prevalent to dust?

Are gilt edges just for decoration or do they have a purpose? These are just some of the questions that children asked and, once back in school, were eager to answer through experimentation.

Making butter by beating cream with a wooden spoon always led to requests to try the procedure again. Children realised that making enough butter for one person took a lot of effort and that feeding a large household would require great effort. They eagerly tried to find more efficient methods such as shaking the cream in a lidded container and comparing beating with a wooden spoon, a metal spoon, a fork, and a rotary hand-whisk. It was also interesting to see whether butter could be made from all types of cream or even from the top layers of bottles of milk (single cream was never successful). In addition, queries arose as to what could be done with the leftover liquid once butter had formed and been removed.

When viewing arrangements for washing clothes and bedding, children realised that modern washing machines and tumble driers are helpful! Knowing, however, that such things would not have been available for the Wimpole Hall servants, further investigations would ensue. These involved researching ways to wring out pillowcases and comparing drying them on lines under a variety of weather conditions and temperatures. When learning to wait at table, children became aware of silver cutlery and the time taken to make it gleam. Back at school, they researched the merits of silver and stainless steel. They also compared different ways to polish metal to make it shine.

Conclusion

Although the Living History Project at Wimpole Hall is sadly not in operation today, the concept of ‘living history’ continues to offer much for promoting

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pupil-initiated, scientific investigations arising from genuine interest in finding out why, what and how.

One aim within the current National Curriculum for Science in England is to ‘*develop understanding of the nature, processes and methods of science through different types of science enquiries that help them to answer scientific questions about the world around them*’. Wimpole Hall certainly encouraged children to ask many questions and, when back in school, to look for answers based on controlled, scientific investigation. Living history or living science?

Note: For information on Wimpole Hall see **www.nationaltrust.org.uk/wimpole-estate**

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