

## Some reflections on working on Field Studies in History - Activity Guides

By Stephen Jordan, Ard Scoil La Salle, Raheny, Dublin 5.

### Origin

The book, *Field Studies in History - Activity Guides* - which was launched by Niamh Breathnach, the Minister for Education in April 1995, originated at a Committee Meeting of the Dublin Branch of the HTAI some years earlier. As a relatively new Committee member I suggested that the Association should be working to improve the service it provides to its members. The form of such services will vary. Ideally, the HTAI should be seen as a resource from which members can draw. It was in that context that I suggested that many practising teachers, occasionally or regularly take students on outings of historic interest. Often one has to devote quite some time, not just to the practicalities of organising the trip, but to preparing suitable work-sheets so that students will gain the utmost from the trip.

In the discussion it was recognised that many of us had notes, questionnaires, work sheets, etc., of places which we had visited with our classes. Why not put all of those together in a reasonably appealing and presentable format and make them available to teachers in a form suitable for photocopying. This would save them the labour of having to prepare site-activity work for historical trips with their students. Having such a compilation available might make teachers more inclined to take history out of the class-room and enliven and enrich it by making it more outward bound, geographically. Those who already go on such outings of an historical nature might also be encouraged to extend their horizons further and visit locations which offer new possibilities as well as visiting sites with which they are already familiar. I expressed a willingness to co-ordinate the collection of suitable work sheets which, it was assumed, many teachers had. It has to be a matter of collecting them, editing them and presenting them!

Notices sent out to members about HTAI events included appeals to forward work sheets which they might have had so that they could be included in the compilation. Similar appeals were made at meetings.

The response overall was negligible. Rather than leave it there, three of us - Deirdre Gogarty, Peter Sobolewski and myself - got together to put a number of activity-guides which we believed would be of use to history teachers, together. All three of us had experience of taking students on historical outings, so the intention was to pool together our experiences and our

work- sheets. We did not stop there but went on to construct activity-guides which we considered useful, particularly in relation to topics on Year 1 of the Junior Certificate History programme and in teaching certain Transition Year modules. There was little major difficulty in deciding on what sites to choose. That was largely dictated by the particular historical locations to which the three of us had had the experience of taking student groups and which we considered valuable in helping students to understand better aspects of the Year syllabus. After some discussion, activity-guides for 13 locations, largely focused on the general Dublin area were decided on. The allocation of the guides was based on individual experience of particular places. Fortunately there was little over-lap. We set to work on the preparation of material on agreed sites. Organising the Activity Guides significant consideration was given to what was to be included in the guides. The hope was to have them as comprehensible as possible, based on broad principles of historical value, in line with the requirements of the syllabus, together with mechanisms to evaluate how beneficial the particular visit would be for students and teachers. With this in mind, each guide was to have a set of *aims and objectives* which were intended to give a context and value to the field study which would be useful to the student and teacher. Of central importance in the preparation of the Activity-Guides was the need to ensure that each field trip was in keeping with the syllabus. Hence the need for a section on *meeting the syllabus requirements* . This would answer questions such as: "How does such an out-of- school activity fit with the course being taught?" "What are the students expected to gain from it?" "How can the trip be justified?" Answers to these questions are needed to keep principals happy! Each Activity Guide would have a section dealing with *preparation*, i.e. what preparatory work needs to be done to ensure that the student gains as much as possible from the visit and what the teacher had to prepare to ensure that the trip is successful. There would also a section on *field work* which would clearly outline what is to be done during the trip. These will vary from field trip to field trip. Such individual location details offer a help to the teacher to ensure that nothing is left out while on the actual historical site. Each Activity Guide would also have a *follow up and evaluation element*. Normally, much effort will have gone into each trip, not least in terms of getting practical things like parents' approval, collection of money, coach booked, contacting site, etc, organised. But if a trip is worth all that, then there must be follow up with the students afterwards to assess (to the extent that that is possible) what has been gained from it the areas of interest aroused, how well the worksheets have been completed, how the enthusiasm generated by the trip can

-Be carried over into class work and how useful that particular trip was. In preparing the Activity Guides, Various sources were checked out and used. It was thought valuable to have a list of such *references* as the teacher may also want to use them in preparing a particular field-trip. It was also considered desirable that each work-sheet would have introductory comments on the field study in question: putting it in its historical context and giving details of a practical nature about it such as times of opening, availability of guides, cost of entry, exact location, etc. Work in progress three of us attention to *Field Studies in History - Activity Guides* and newspapers carried reports of the launch, thus raising the profile of history at second level and drawing public attention to the work of HTAI. Observations some reflections and lessons can be drawn from the experience, now that publication is a reality. Three of us working together on a book has its advantages and disadvantages. The greatest advantage is that one gets feed-back and encouragement from the others. Uncertainties and doubts are shared and clarified. In a sense we acted as editors of each others work. Three working on a project lessens the load on one. The major disadvantage is that as individuals, we work at different paces and have different expectations in terms of clarity and levels of presentation. Most importantly we had commitments to school and out-of-school activities which were often time-consuming and varied. This understandably called for patience as one waits on the others for the work to be completed.

At the outset, there was uncertainty about the format and about who would meet the cost This is unlike the situation with school text-books where there is a publisher, a more or less accepted final format and where there are promotional outlets and the necessary financial resources to do justice to the proposed publication. It was encouraging to become aware that the printing and publication of educational material will be financially backed by state agencies, if they are seen to have a contribution to make to the development of the young, to the understanding of the society in which we live and to the enrichment of the educational work in the classroom. The procedure, however, which is adopted in establishing contact and seeking support for such projects is important, as the various agencies have, understandably, to be convinced that what is being proposed is worthwhile and that it will meet certain criteria. In this respect, when working on *Field Studies in History*, the expertise of the Blackrock Teachers' Centre and in particular its director, Seamus Ó Canainn, was most helpful. The proposal seeking financial support was prepared thoroughly and carefully, using the experience which the Centre has gained over the years. *Field Studies in History* is directed to topics in Year 1 of the Junior Certificate history syllabus and largely deals with locations in

the general Dublin area, though with a few centres located outside it. Similar books could usefully be compiled directed at Year 2 or Year 3, with a focus not necessarily on Dublin. The Blackrock Teachers' Centre and the Office of Public Works will be again available to offer their full support