



The Standing Stone

Tony Pickford

In a rather chilly primary school hall in mid-January, a group of Year 5 children are creeping slowly on tiptoe towards a chair that sits in isolation at one end of the room. They glance at each other and stop momentarily before continuing their stealthy advance. The rest of their class sit tensely, watching and waiting to see what will happen when they reach the chair or rather what the chair symbolises. Waiting to hear a voice that will tell a very strange story.

You may ask what has this rather odd scene got to do with primary history. The answer, strictly speaking, is 'nothing' because the activity this class is engaged in is about prehistory and a drama-based project which aims to bring the very distant past to life. The class are taking it in turns to act out a rehearsed scene from a story called 'The Standing Stone'. Soon they will encounter a character in the story that will lead them into interpretation and enquiry.

'The Standing Stone' story and the activities around it developed from several different starting-points. One was the requirement in the 2014 National Curriculum for history at Key Stage 2 for children to be taught prehistory, specifically about 'changes in Britain from the Stone Age to the Iron Age', with Bronze Age technology being an example of content. How could this be taught in a way that might engage and excite children as well as develop historical skills and understandings?

An answer suggested itself through work I had carried out in the past with a colleague in the Faculty of Education at Chester: Allan Owens, Professor of Drama Education. Allan is a keen proponent and practitioner of pre-text, process drama – a specific form of drama education where participants engage actively in a practical drama task that starts a learning process. The term 'pre-text' refers to the source of the drama activity – a story – with learners stepping in and out of roles in the story's collectively imagined world. As a teaching strategy, it provides a vicarious experience that encourages observation of others, fosters empathy and, most importantly, enables questions to be raised about unfamiliar subject matter, motivations and situations.

My wife – at the time a Traveller Education consultant with Cheshire West and Chester Council – and I had worked with Allan on a story-based process drama, which explored gypsy traveller culture and lifestyle from a children's perspective. The project – known as 'Michael's Story' – had been successful in addressing stereotypes and providing a safe, inclusive environment for sharing experiences, attitudes and views. Workshops had been carried out with children and adults in a wide variety of settings, from lower Key Stage 2 classes to meetings of local councillors.

I began to consider ways in which Allan's story-based, drama approach might be used to make prehistory



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accessible and engaging for Key Stage 2 children. What was needed was a story, which lent itself to rehearsed scenes, which might spark imagination and lead into investigation. At that point I recalled a personal encounter with prehistory, which had been memorable and had also been documented with lots of photos that I had taken. While walking in southern Snowdonia in 2013, my wife and I had come across a menhir or standing stone called Llech Idris.

Standing near the village of Bronaber in North Wales, on exposed, windy moorland, Llech Idris is a leaning, pointed slab 1.5 metres across and over three metres high. Legend has it that it was hurled into the ground from the top of the nearby mountain of Cadair Idris by a grumpy giant. More prosaically, research suggests it is around 3,000 years old, dating from the late Bronze Age. With moss and lichen on one side and bare rock on the other, it raises all sorts of questions about significance and purpose. Looking back at the photographs of the megalith, I was struck with the idea that perhaps its purpose might be communication – perhaps on a special day, at a special time or to a certain person it might act as a portal into the distant past allowing someone from prehistory to communicate with the present day!

With this idea in mind, I developed a story, partly illustrated by my images of Lech Idris, which centres on a group of Year 6 children, on a post-SATs residential

visit to a Snowdonia Outdoor Centre, who encounter the stone. A voice seeming to come from within it is the starting point for an adventure involving the children, the warden of the Outdoor Centre and their teacher. A box of objects from the Bronze Age appears at one stage and the children are given the task of interpreting what they are, with the reward being that they will be able to see a Bronze Age village and ask questions about it. Not the most original story, but one which I hoped would engage children and lead into meaningful enquiry and question raising. The story would provide a context through which essential concepts and skills from the National Curriculum would be developed and addressed, including an awareness of how knowledge is constructed from sources and the devising of questions about change, similarity and difference.

Once it had been drafted, I took the story to Allan and we looked at ways in which it might work as a process drama. Points in the story where rehearsed scenes might bring it to life were identified, including a scene when the children approach the stone for a second time having heard its voice and initially run away (the scene described at the start of this piece). For the interpretation activity, I needed objects representative of Bronze Age life that children could engage with. Although I thought this would be a major stumbling block, I quite quickly put together a collection of items drawn from replica makers, a local archaeology-based



social enterprise, and metal detectorists on EBay. The last may not be the most reliable or, indeed, ethical source, but I felt that a few bronze objects that had actually lain in the ground for millennia might spark children's imagination and make the mystery box more convincing. For the box itself, I asked a friend who is a carpenter and wooden toy maker to make a container from rough wood held together with bronze (actually brass) nails. Once the box arrived, I wrapped my collection of items in scraps of brown felt, so that unwrapping would add to the fascination of the task.

The objects included:

- a tiny bronze arrow-head, a small bracelet (possibly for a child) and a set of bronze rings, sourced via EBay;
- reproductions of a lunular necklace, a bronze spearhead and a small scythe from replica makers;
- a pottery beaker, flint arrow-heads and flint tools – making the point that bronze tools did not replace earlier technologies, but augmented them.

We were now nearly ready to try out our activity for the first time, but as I wanted it to end with question-raising that might lead into further investigation, I needed an image of a Bronze Age village to prompt children's further questions. For this I approached another contact – a commercial artist who has done a lot of work with local museums – and asked if he would create an image for us. He agreed and, at a

fraction of his normal fee, he produced a picture of the village of Llech Idris that had a lively cartoonish style. Most importantly, it depicted a range of activities and events in the village that would prompt many questions.

After an initial pilot with a couple of student groups in the faculty, Allan and I took 'The Standing Stone' out into local schools. Based on his experience of working with primary school groups, Allan chose Year 5 as the most appropriate age-range. Our initial workshops were very successful, with children being engaged by the story and participating enthusiastically in the rehearsed scenes. Using the role of the Outdoor Centre warden, we carefully introduced background knowledge about the Bronze Age into the story, particularly evidence of settlements 3,000 years ago and the transformative effect of metal-working technology. This helped to place the interpretation activity into context. Children were given the task of identifying the objects and giving reasons for their views. This two-step process produced some imaginative ideas and surprisingly accurate interpretations of the objects.

Although we used a projector, screen and presentation software to share the images of Llech Idris while telling the story, when it came to the question-raising activity about the Bronze Age village we felt that printed images would be more effective. Children went into small groups of two or three and shared laminated A3 sheets. Their discussions and questioning were

clearly enhanced by physical interaction with the image. Children were observed pointing at features and interpreting the activities shown – the arrival of a hunter, repairing of a roof, spinning and weaving. When the questions were shared, we responded to some – mainly those which related to specific features in the image – but saved others for further research and, possibly, ‘expert’ advice.

Questions raised by the school groups included:

- How do they make their clothes?
- Is the village safe? (There is no gate).
- Where would they get clay to make pots from?
- How many people would live in the village?
- Why are the houses round? Are there fires in the houses?
- Why is the village not a hill-fort?
- Where is the standing stone?
- Where did they get copper and tin from?
- What has the person coming through the gate caught?
- Why are there ladders on the roof of a house?

As already mentioned, the questions ranged in scope from specific references to the image or the story to quite generalised questions about Bronze Age lifestyles

and technology. The children were highly motivated to carry out further research, with the drama providing a starting-point and purpose for their investigations. Evaluation at the end of each performance showed that the children had gained knowledge and understandings from the experience in itself. When asked ‘What have you learned from the Standing Stone Story?’ responses included:

- That the Bronze Age was more civilised than I thought.
- They traded by swapping and also had ‘ring money’.
- I learnt what different artefacts are called and what they were used for.
- I found out that bronze is made from tin and copper.
- Not everything was made of bronze – they also used flint and stone.
- They lived in round houses in the Bronze Age.
- They had wealth and were warriors.
- They used sheep’s fleece to make clothes.
- They had jewellery and weapons made of bronze.
- They were good at making pottery.
- They used wool from sheep to make thread and weaved it into clothes.
- I learnt that history could be fun!





Websites

Providing support for Primary Prehistory

- The BBC Bitesize website features resources on the Bronze Age, which focus on enquiry questions such as 'How did people travel in the Bronze Age?': www.bbc.co.uk/guides/z874kqt
- Website for 'a group of archaeologists and educators with knowledge and expertise in Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age Britain'. The site has a useful blog as well as offering links to local 'experts' and school-based workshops: www.schoolsprehistory.co.uk
- Dave Weldrake is a highly experienced archaeologist who has compiled a very useful list of prehistory resources appropriate to Key Stage 2: <https://daveweldrake.wordpress.com/teaching-prehistory-in-primary-school>

Providing Bronze Age objects

- Ancient Arts provides bespoke collections of replica artefacts for object handling in schools and museums: www.ancient-arts.org/teachingcollections.html
- Ancient Craft sells a selection of mainly flint tools, as well as offering living history sessions in schools: www.ancientcraft.co.uk
- Big Heritage is a social enterprise based in Chester that can supply a selection of replica objects, including flint tools and pottery: <http://bigheritage.co.uk>
- Bronze Age Foundry produces replicas of bronze artefacts, weapons and tools: <http://bronzeagefoundry.com>
- Museum Reproductions sources replica artefacts from a range of periods. Search their website using the term 'Bronze Age' to find relevant objects: www.museumreproductions.co.uk



Resources

Drama processes

Adams, J. & Owens, A. (2016) *Creativity and Democracy in Education: the practice and politics of education through the arts*. Oxford: Routledge.

When asked about their likes and dislikes, children were very positive, with comments such as:

- I like when we were acting. It had lots of tension which made it more exciting.
- It gave me a big picture in my head and a big imagination. It was a little bit scary.
- I like the way it wasn't just a story – you got us involved too.
- We felt stuff that was 3,000 years old.

Suggested improvements included shortening the story a little to give more space for 'acting' and acting out some of the interactions and events in the picture of the village. Both of these suggestions will inform our future school visits.

The Standing Stone project has been an enjoyable and thought-provoking experience, illustrating clearly that process drama can be used to develop, in this case, prehistorical understandings and the skills of enquiry at Key Stage 2. The online resources for primary prehistory listed below provide some starting points for follow-up work in the classroom, including independent research by children. The objects could also be used as finds in a reconstruction of an archaeological dig in which children use and develop archaeological skills, such as excavating, recording and reconstructing.

I would like to involve more teachers and schools in developing 'The Standing Stone' as a teaching resource. If you would like to use the story and the accompanying resources (script, presentation and village picture) to teach this aspect of prehistory, please contact me at the email address below.

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HA Resources

The Historical Association's online resources on prehistory www.history.org.uk/primary/categories/the-stone-age-to-the-iron-age include the following:

Brown, S. (2013) Podcast Series: *From the Stone Age to the Romans*, Historical Association

Pryor, F., Morris, H. (2014) 'Stone Age to Iron Age – overview and depth' in *Primary History*, 66, pp. 20–31. This features an overview of prehistoric periods as well as ideas for teaching activities on prehistory.

Wilkinson, A. (2014) *Primary Scheme of Work. Stone Age to Iron Age*. Historical Association

Notes for the co-ordinator

The article conveys clearly how what could be a rather dry subject area lacking the wow factor can really be brought to life. There is clearly evidence that it puts the pupils into enquiry mode and motivates them. Although aimed here at Year 5, such an approach could be used in a similar way throughout the years of Key Stage 2.

The co-ordinator is likely to want to plan for is how such a motivating learning activity might fit into the school's scheme of work for prehistory or even a separate enquiry on the Bronze Age.

It is likely the co-ordinator wanting to devote time to Bronze Age Britain will want to ensure that the teaching programmes appears coherent by considering issues such as:

- What were the most important changes that happened in the Bronze Age? (*addressing concepts such as change, development, significance*). For example, teachers might want to explain what bronze is and how people at the time probably made it. Why is this an improvement on earlier stone objects?
- When did the Bronze Age occur? (ie. 2000 BC to 800 BC – marking on a timeline showing what went before and what after. Teachers might want to demonstrate far away it is from our own time.
- How do we know about what happened? (*addressing concepts including evidence and providing opportunities for pupils to discuss and make deductions*). Teachers can draw attention to some of the main finds such as Mold Cup, Rillaton hoard, Ferriby boat, the Salcombe undersea Bronze Age wreck, burial mounds, and reconstructions of Bronze Age houses whilst also stressing they did not write anything.
- Why do you think these changes happened? (*addressing the concept of causation*).
- Do we know anything about what the Bronze Age was like in this area? (*addressing the concept of evidence and placing the local within a wider context*).
- How pleasant was it to have lived in the Bronze Age? (*making judgements based on evidence, and recognising different viewpoints*). Pupils can be given a range of different sources – artefacts or pictures of, for example, gold cups, beakers, bracelets, necklaces, cauldrons, spear heads). Teachers will probably need to get over the fact that not EVERYTHING was made of bronze at this time. They still used stone, pottery, leather, bone, hide etc;.Pupils can be encouraged to make deductions about lifestyle, eg. they cooked, they travelled.
- What were the main difficulties that Bronze Age people might have faced? (*addressing the concepts of significance – making judgements about importance based on evidence*).
- In what ways was it easier to live in another period (eg. the Iron Age) rather than the Bronze Age? (*allowing pupils to consider comparison, similarity and difference*).

Tim Lomas