**The Wor Bella Schools Project**

Introduction

In the 2020 journal of the Northeast Labour History Society, I wrote a piece about going to schools to teach pupils about local history and their cultural heritage. I have been back into schools with the Wor Bella Project, teaching pupils about the life of Bella Reay, a Munitionettes footballer as well as other aspects of our regional history and cultural heritage.

This is a summary of what I have done as well as some reflections on how it went and what can be learnt from the experience for other similar work in schools.

**A Brief History of Bella Reay**

Bella’s early life

Bella was born in Cowpen, near Blyth, Northumberland in 1900, the daughter of a coal miner and his wife. In 1914 the First World War began and with most young men away fighting the war, many young women found work in factories making munitions for the war and the young women working in these factories became known as Munitionettes. In 1917, Bella herself became a Munitionette.

What was football like during the First World War?

Major league football was suspended during the First World War. However, the game was still popular and amateur leagues continued with games played to raise morale during a difficult time for people, to entertain them and to collect money for charity.

These included both men and women’s teams. In August 1917, a team was founded in Blyth among women working in the local docks and the munitions factory. Bella Reay was among those who joined this new team.

They soon became the best women’s football team in the Northeast and Bella Reay was their star.

The Blyth Spartans Munitionettes

Bella’s team became known as the Blyth Spartans Munitionettes or Blyth Spartans Ladies. They played their games at Croft Park, the home of Blyth Spartans and large crowds came to watch them, paying a lot of money into charity funds.

Blyth Spartans Munitionettes went on to win the Munitionettes Cup in the 1917-18 season. In the final at Ayresome Park in Middlesbrough, Bella scored 4 goals.

The Play

The work in schools is part of a wider project, initiated by a play entitled Wor Bella, written by the Tyneside playwright Ed Waugh.

The play charts the story of Bella Reay from her early days through her becoming a teenage Munitionette, her glory days in the 1917-8 season when she scored a remarkable 133 goals in 30 games, to her disappointment when women’s football was banned in 1921.

This is what the playwright Ed Waugh said about his play:

“When men were called up in 1916 after slaughter in the trenches, women flooded into the munitions factories and saved the war effort. Despite their dangerous jobs and long hours (60 hours a week) these heroic ‘munitionettes’ also played football to raise money for wartime charities.“

*Wor Bella* is the story of Blyth Spartans Ladies’ remarkable munitionettes’ cup victory in May 1918.”

The Work in Schools

The work in schools has been over two-days, following a set programme, although this has been tweaked on occasions to fit in with the routines of individual schools.

Introduction to the project and Bella Reay.

This has been in the form of a short power point presentation, given to the pupils. The aim was that, by the end of the presentation, the pupils would have some idea of who Bella Reay was, what else we would be learning about and how the pupils would be responding in creative ways.

From that point until break-time the time was mostly spent with the pupils learning ‘The Skeul Board Man’ by Tommy Armstrong and ‘Sally Wheatley’ by Joe Wilson. We used a version of The Skeul Board Man from YouTube as a guide, with words provided to the pupils and I sang and played guitar for Sally Wheatley as a guide for that song.

The pupils enjoyed both songs. The Skeul Board Man had subject matter, which was relevant to them, concerning a young lad, his father and the local School Board man and the consequences of the young lad not going to school. Some of the phrasing was difficult, but it was usual for there to be a run through by three of the pupils before break-time.

The pupils also enjoyed Sally Wheatley. It is a very pleasant song to sing and they easily picked up the chorus and got the gist of the verses as well.

Before each song was learnt, I went through the lyrics with them, to make sure that they understood what they were singing about. I also pointed out how both writers had used dialect words and had used them cleverly to produce rhymes, on occasions when Standard English words did not rhyme.

Break to Lunch

The period from break to lunchtime saw an interactive overview, of who Bella Reay was and the kind of world she was born into in 1900, with some of the great features of Northeast history.

I asked the pupils questions as we went along and encouraged them to ask me questions. This invariably worked well. It was always a pleasure to see just how interesting they found the history and how they saw it as relevant. Many pupils had family history, which they could relate to in connection with what we spoke about.

Afternoon

The first afternoon usually began with a local dialect/language quiz and a few words about using our local dialect. The pupils were given 20 words in the local dialect/language and asked them to write down what the Standard English was for each word. We also discussed how important it was to keep the local dialect/language alive, whilst also recognising that on other occasions we need to speak in Standard English so that other people from other parts of the country can understand us.

Following the dialect/language quiz, the class or larger group was split into three groups:

* Play-writing group with the class teacher – writing a play about Bella Reay and the Northeast of her time, developing a series of dramatic responses to what they had learnt about Bella Reay and the time in which she lived. The plays usually concentrated on Bella becoming a footballer and on how Women’s Football was banned in 1921. The pupils enjoyed writing and producing these short plays and the others enjoyed watching them as well.
* Song-writing group with myself - writing a song about Bella Reay and the Northeast of her time. This group would work with me to write a song about Bella and her life and often about what was happening around those times. We even found time on one occasion to explore issues around mining and how we now need to keep coal in the ground because of the ongoing Climate Crisis.
* Research group – each pupil taking a theme from the history we have studied and producing a power-point slide about it, using resources provided by myself and internet research. This group also enjoyed their work and often did excellent research, not just copying what was on resources provided for them.

The slides were on a number of aspects of history in the Northeast.

There was also usually a slide produced helping pupils to explain how having an appreciation of local cultural heritage should help us to appreciate other cultures.

The group work enabled pupils to practise a large range of skills, as well as delving deeper into the story of Bella Reay and the accompanying local and regional history.

If the group was big enough, then some would work on arts and crafts for the exhibition in the Phoenix Theatre in Blyth.

End of day plenary – run through ‘The Skeul Board Man’ and ‘Sally Wheatley’ again and see what the different groups have produced.

Day Two

Registration to Break

We would usually start the second day, by remembering what had been achieved the previous week, perhaps a short quiz to see what they could remember and often a quick run through 'The Skeul Board Man’ and ‘Sally Wheatley’.

The class or year group would then split up into three groups again to continue work on the play, song (if it needed finishing) and power-point presentation.

Break to Lunch

By break time on the second day, it was hoped that the new song, play and slides would be completed. If not the pupils were given time after break to do so. Once ready, we would start putting the show together and rehearsing. An outgoing and confident pupil was chosen to get us started with a music hall type introduction, and then the rehearsal would proceed with power-point presentations of the two old songs, the new song and the new play.

Afternoon

On the second afternoon we would complete putting the show together and rehearsing it ready for it to be recorded.

Then in the last hour or so, we put on a music hall type show with introduction presentations, song and short play. This was filmed for the rest of the school and for parents to see.

For an example of what was produced at one school please see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjZSfnKzzEQ

On one occasion in a primary school in Blyth, one of the pupils told me that she had a relative, by the name of Matthew Tate who had also been a pitman poet for the Southeast Northumberland area. After doing a little research, it turned out that Matthew was, "born on 5 September 1837 in Benton Square, Benton in Newcastle. His family were miners as were many of their antecedents." In c1874 he published his first book of poetry, followed later by "Poems, Songs and Ballads by Matthew Tate".” It is thought that he was also a contributor to the arts sections of the local newspapers and periodicals. It has been noted that he lived in Waterloo, Blyth for many years. He also had a book of poems entitled “StraY Blossom” (correct spelling with capital Y) published in about 1874. (1)

What some of the headteachers said about the project

“*Our pupils benefited greatly from this project. There was something for everyone. Purposeful activities included script and song writing, performing, computing, arts and crafts. We loved it!"*-  Tim Shenton, Headteacher, East Boldon Junior school.

*"Peter really made local history come to life. They [the pupils] thoroughly enjoyed their work with him and gained a really good understanding of the issues of the time"*- Susan McBeth, Headteacher, Jarrow Cross Primary School.

*"Thanks for all your hard work. It was great to see the children gain a real in depth knowledge and insight into their cultural heritage. It was good also to let the children being given the chance to express themselves in a more dramatic and expressive format."* - Steve Bowler, Headteacher of Monkton Primary school.

**Reflections on the Wor Bella Project**

The Wor Bella Project was a great success in a number of ways:

By encouraging the pupils to take an interest in the story of Wor Bella and through them their families it helped to combat the inequalities around participation and engagement as audiences.

The project was a prime example of a relevant, diverse cultural experiences for working-class pupils  
  
The project did a great job in encouraging individual creativity. The pupils enjoyed responding creatively to the information and stories they were introduced to.

The project worked very well and was met with enthusiasm by both students and teachers. Please see https://www.worbella.co.uk/educational-activities .

The students responded to the subject matter, because it was relevant to them and raised important questions about the world they live in. What was great to see was the way that the stories inspired such a great amount of creativity from them, whether in terms of producing song lyrics, drama or power point slides. The shows that they put on at the end of the two day workshops showed just how much they had learnt and had embraced the cultural opportunities provided to them.

This kind of work could be built upon, by developing a pathway from  
doing this kind of work in school to doing larger artworks and so encourage creative and critical abilities among the students. While some opportunities do exist, we still need to develop more opportunities to help young people see creating culture as part of their life and not just something that they leave behind when they leave school. We particularly need to develop these opportunities for young people who are from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Wor Bella Schools Project showed just how easily young people in the Northeast can get involved in cultural work when it is made relevant to them and their lives. It is really important that they are given opportunities to do this and feel that their cultural responses are as important as anybody else’s.

At one school a teacher linked the artwork of the Ashington Pitmen Painters with that of L.S. Lowry, whose work is part of the National Curriculum, so showing how appreciation of local culture can help to understand culture on a wider level.

**Using our cultural heritage to produce new creative opportunities**

The project showed how using past achievements as an inspiration can help us to create meaningful culture, helping young people to gain a positive identity and a real sense of place.

As was said about the Spennymoor Settlement, “Arts should portray the present in light of the past and the future in light of both and hopes for the future based on what is possible” (2) So we can use the arts of the past to help us consider what our hopes are for the future and surely no group of people in our region need this more than our young people.

The project helped young people to create cultural responses in line with the values of solidarity, tolerance and fairness.

**What could be done in other settings?**

This project showed how using the cultural heritage of the Northeast can be an inspiration to young people to help them to create their own culture.

It showed how there can be a living tradition of cultural expression in the region, which can build on past achievements

There is much to learn from our history, particularly from the 1930’s. This was a time of great economic distress in the region, but it still saw a flourishing of culture in parts of the region, as a result of visionary work by people such as Bill Farrell in Spennymoor and Robert Lyons in Ashington.

At Spennymoor Settlement there were the mining artists such as Norman Cornish and Tom McGuinness and the writer Sid Chaplin, while at Ashington the Ashington Group of Painters also produced inspiring work.

As McManners and Wales have noted, the official objective of the Spennymoor Settlement was, “to encourage tolerant neighbourliness and voluntary social service and give its members opportunities for increasing their knowledge, widening their interests and cultivating their creative powers in a friendly atmosphere”. (3)

These are great examples of what can be done and could be used to inspire new generations of young working class writers and artists.

**Conclusion**

The Wor Bella Schools Project has been a very successful and enjoyable project to be involved with. It was great to see just how much the pupils took to the subject matter and enjoyed being creative in response.

It proved that the history and cultural heritage of Northeast England can be of great interest to young people in the region. It also demonstrated a way of linking the history and cultural heritage of the region to the creation of new cultural resources and to widening the number and scope of those involved in culture in the region.

The work showed how an appreciation of regional culture can lead on to a wider appreciation of culture generally, helping students to feel that the world of art and indeed other arts, is something open to them and not just for people who live somewhere else.

For more information on Ed Waugh’s play Wor Bella please go to: https://www.worbella.co.uk/

Endnotes

1. [https://peoplepill.com/people/matthew-taHYPERLINK "https://peoplepill.com/people/matthew-tate"te](https://peoplepill.com/people/matthew-tate)

2. R. McManners and G. Wales, Way to the Better: The Spennymoor Settlement, p. 43

3. ibid. p. 16