

How does ‘Enquiry’ contribute to work at historical sites and museums?

Visits to museums and historic sites help pupils build up knowledge and understanding of a topic or period but should also link into core enquiries. Visits can fit in at different stages of the enquiry process as suggested below.

Approach 1

Use the site at the very beginning of an enquiry to stimulate questions and create initial hypotheses. Then return to school to use other resources to test and develop those hypotheses and build fuller answers to the questions. For example, take a question such as ‘Did the Romans change the way the Britons lived?’ One very good way to start, to begin developing an answer, is to go to a Roman site and use the evidence there – what does it tell you that begins to answer the question? Then take those hypotheses and follow them up using a wider range of resources in school.

Approach 2

Begin the process in school with pupils developing hypotheses in answer to a question. Then undertake the site or museum visit to see if their answers stand up against the evidence they see, whether it’s a building or a range of objects in a museum or an interpretation presented by an actor at the site. For example, pupils may be exploring the story of everyday life and could build a general answer using books, pictures and sources in the classroom. But was that what it was like in their town? That’s where a visit allows pupils to use their local museum to test their hypothesis – was it like that here?

Using either of these approaches has two other benefits. Firstly it requires that the visit is embedded in a sequence of lessons – school – visit – school – rather than being a one-off ‘trip’ whose value is likely to be extremely limited because it is just a one-off. Secondly these approaches mean that teachers accompanying the trip have to be fully involved because the activities link in closely to what’s happened before and what will happen in succeeding lessons. A visit should never be an opportunity to hand over completely to museum or site staff – if you do, how are you going to build on the pupils’ experiences?