



**Fig. 2** Digging the dirt - practical excavation was a high point of the experience. ■

## **“I’ll never be the same again!”**

**Inspiring a passion for the past  
by working with young people out of school**

**Towse Harrison** Sun Jester - Consultants for Lifelong Learning,  
Historical Interpretation and Community Arts,  
United Kingdom

● **The article introduces out-of-school courses for 9-13 and 14-19 age groups aimed at encouraging interest in history through a variety of practical activities.**

Sun Jester Consultancy had its genesis some ten years ago when my partner Graham and I became concerned about the limitations imposed on the teaching and enjoyment of history and archaeology by the National Curriculum

for England. Neither of us held fond memories of our own school experience, but we were concerned to hear people, adults as well as children, express the opinion that history was boring and irrelevant.

My own interest had been re-ignited by the charisma and enthusiasm of the historian and TV presenter, Michael Wood. His work inspired me to achieve my first degree, specialising in the medieval period, under the generous regime of the late Henry Loyn and Brenda Bolton at the much missed Westfield College, London. More recently I gained an MA with distinction from the Institute of Education in London specialising in the use of Museums and Galleries in Education. As a consultant my work is primarily to enable my clients, usually museums and heritage sites, to maximise the appeal of their learning opportunities and events for their visitors of all ages and abilities. I believe that Sun Jester's strength lies in our ability to offer sound theory and advice married to years of practical experience of creating and delivering engaging interactives.

In the meantime Sun Jester's work with young people and families, in both formal and informal learning environments had been evolving to the point where we had been able to put together a mission statement. *'The Sun Jester philosophy is to encourage understanding and inspire learning through imagination, observation, experiment and experience rather than through traditional didactic methods of teaching and explanation. This is in the same way perhaps as our ancestors understood their world through experience, not by how many facts they knew about it.'* So, every aspect of our work, even an hour's workshop for a young school group, will contain a practical activity aimed to deepen and extend the learning experience.

In 2002 we were approached by Susan Ploetz of the Bedfordshire and Luton Education Business Partnership with a view to creating a programme

of out of school courses for the 9-13 and 14-19 age groups. All participants are self selecting and all courses have been extremely well subscribed, some young people travelling considerable distances to attend. As I write we have just finished the programme for Summer 2004 which has so far consisted of 'The Best Bits of History' (an introduction to research), 'Archaeo-History' (an introduction to archaeological practice and some of the skills of the past), 'Tolkien and His Histories' (an unashamed opportunity to capitalise on the popularity of Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings' and Peter Jackson's trilogy of films to introduce Saxon and Early English studies) and 'Prehistoric and Ancient Art and Technology' (designed to fit into the Art and Design strand of The Bedford Children's University for 9-13 year olds). Still to come this year are 'History Detectives' (a junior version of Archaeo-History), a variation on 'The Best Bits of History' (which will focus on the Key Stage Two (8-12) curriculum but with an emphasis on the practical and experimental) and for Spring 2005 at the request of a group of teenagers 'An Introduction to Classical and Renaissance Philosophy'.

Whatever the subject of a course, and however different the individual ingredients, the overall recipe concept remains the same. Each course offers:

- an organic approach capable of being flexible according to the interests and needs of the participants
- maximum group size of 15 to ensure maximum opportunity for everyone to be fully involved
- a variety of practical activities, drizzled with appropriate facts and theory

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- an opportunity for hands-on engagement with a large variety of genuine and high quality replica artefacts
- a visit to a site chosen for its relevance to the topic of the course (and preferably one which participants might not have the opportunity to visit otherwise)
- visits by outside specialists (e.g. John Lord one of the UK's foremost experts in the construction of prehistoric tools and the use of prehistoric technology) willing to share their skills with young people in a hands-on environment

The timetable for the 2004 'Archaeo-History' shows how we developed these themes over five days:

**Day 1:** An introduction to interpretation and observation using domestic rubbish and examples of documentary sources – an introduction to prehistoric tools – practical introduction to Roman mosaic plus making a 'mini-mosaic' – basic braiding techniques for cordage and lacing

**Day 2:** A visit to the local parish church and museum to engage with a previously taken for granted built environment and objects seen under glass – an exercise in looking for evidence of both the obvious and the not so obvious, even non-existent. Practical work with clay based on medieval tiles and anthropomorphic designs

**Day 3:** A day of practical excavation, geophysics and finds processing at an C11th/C12th site courtesy of County Archaeological (Training) Services.

**Day 4:** A day with John and Val Lord – construction and finishing of stone tools, cordage and weaving with



**Fig. 1** Patience, persistence and a willingness to get very muddy! ■

Stinging Nettles – introduction to basic technology

**Day 5:** Development of weapons and warfare from Roman to Medieval and the construction of small pieces of mail from 12 mm mild steel rings. An introduction to illuminated manuscripts (examples seen at the museum) and the art of the scribe including the making of a quill pen and experiments with ink recipes.

While the courses are designed to be an immersion experience, it was always our intention that they should be 'tasters' only, designed to tantalise and refresh jaded spirits and to encourage individual curiosity. That said, 'Archaeo-History 2' is now in development for 2005, due to the number of requests for an advanced version. We also know of one of our 2003 Archaeo-Historians who went on to complete A'level Archaeology in her own time. The Co-ordinator for The Children's University was heard

to comment to a VIP visitor ‘Of all the courses this is the one I would have liked to have done myself!’ Incidentally, we would love to run similar courses for adults but have so far found no appropriate funding opportunity. Susan Ploetz is to be commended for her hard work in ensuring continued funding for the young people’s courses.

To measure the real success, however, perhaps it is better to let the young Archaeo-Historians speak for themselves:

- ‘I have arranged with a friend to camp for a weekend using only natural materials such as flint and nettles.’
- ‘Prehistoric people are more intelligent than I had originally thought and had quite advanced methods.’



**Fig. 3** It takes two! Team work on using a bow drill. ■



**Fig. 4** Pressure flaking for beginners. ■

- ‘I have learnt more about even my own hometown!’
- ‘I am not afraid to ask museum people for information...museum models can be wrong!’
- ‘I have learnt how to talk in a group and be confident, flint knapping, making quills, how to identify burnt limestone and separate rock from pottery, how to create a small cutter from flint...the list goes on.’
- ‘You need to carry out their techniques to know about how they lived.’
- ‘There is a more practical side to history than just looking through books.’
- ‘History is very important because it is relevant to today.’
- ‘The dig was amazing – especially finding my pot (green glazed from 1125 when English were trying to copy the French equivalent and failing).’
- ‘I have learnt to look at things in a new way – seeing things that weren’t obvious before, getting more out of visiting places, etc. Learning bits of history I did not know about and the puzzle style of thinking.’
- ‘It has made what was conveyed as a very dull past into a very mysterious past.’

Sun Jester’s development of such a successful concept would not have been achieved were we not so personally passionate about re-igniting interest and curiosity and being prepared to work hard to achieve a good balance of communication with our students. We have learnt to be responsive and flexible, assertively non-directive (!), inclusive

and non-judgemental. We have been personally prepared to commit to an ongoing process of lifelong learning and continuing professional development and to engage in wide reaching networking and creative thinking.

Do we enjoy it? Totally. Is it working? I think so. This year, while visiting Sutton Hoo, one young girl said to me *'I totally get why you think this place is so important. I wish all teaching could be like this!'* That's what I call success!

## Summary

### **“Ich werde niemals mehr der gleiche sein!” Außerschulische Arbeit mit jungen Menschen kann eine Leidenschaft für die Vergangenheit wecken**

Die hauptsächliche Tätigkeit des Beratungsbüros “Sun Jester” besteht darin, es seinen Kunden – vor allem Museen und kulturhistorischen Stätten - zu ermöglichen, ihre Attraktivität hinsichtlich ihrer pädagogischen Möglichkeiten für Besucherinnen und Besucher jeden Alters und Interesses zu optimieren. Im Jahr 2002 wurde das Beratungsbüro mit der Aufgabe betraut, ein außerschulisches Programm mit Kursangeboten für 9 – 13 Jährige und für 14 – 19 Jährige zu erarbeiten. Die Kurse sollten die individuelle Neugier und das Interesse durch ein reichhaltiges Angebot an praktischen Aktivitäten, durch Besuche bei ausgewählten archäologischen Fundplätzen und durch Treffen mit außerschulischen Fachleuten wecken. Um eine möglichst intensive Beteiligung aller Teilnehmerinnen und Teilnehmer zu gewährleisten, wurden die Kurse nur für kleine Gruppen von maximal 15 Personen durchgeführt. Die Idee von “Sun Jester” ist es dabei, nicht durch traditionelle didaktische Methoden von Unterricht und Erklären, sondern durch Phantasie, Beobachtung, Experiment und Erfahrung das Verstehen zu fördern und zum Lernen zu ermuntern.

### **«Je ne serai plus jamais tel comme avant!» Éveil de l'histoire auprès des jeunes par le travail**

Le service de consultation Sun Jester s'efforce d'aider ses clients, musées et monuments le plus souvent, à profiter au maximum leur potentiel éducatif et le mettre en disposition à tous les visiteurs sans différences d'âge et de capacités. En 2002, on leur a demandé d'établir des cours extrascolaires pour les enfants de 9-13 et de 13-19 ans. Dans le but de susciter l'intérêt pour l'histoire, les cours proposent des activités pratiques, des excursions sur les sites archéologiques et des visites chez les spécialistes. Les cours sont organisés en petits groupes de 15 personnes au maximum pour pouvoir bien engager tous les participants au programme. Écartant ainsi les méthodes pédagogiques traditionnelles, le programme de Sun Jester veut faire découvrir, comprendre et inspirer à l'aide de l'imagination, l'observation et l'expérience.