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## **When the Stamp Made its Mark**

### **Making the Penny Black Cantata: The Creative Process**

Between November 2010 and April 2011, children from three Wyre Forest primary schools and members of Wyre Forest Young Voices worked with a writer, musicians, a radio producer and a sound engineer to create their own podcast combining the spoken word and music, entitled *The Penny Black Cantata – Letters to a Loved One*. We also staged a live performance of the Cantata at Kidderminster Town Hall. The project was managed by Kidderminster Choral Society and was supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. This information sheet documents the creative process, in order to help teachers run similar projects with children and young people.

#### **Our aims**

Our project had six main aims:

1. To give children in three Wyre Forest primary schools, their teachers and families, and the members of Wyre Forest Young Voices the chance to learn, in an interactive way, about Rowland Hill, the Penny Black's heritage and its impact on the world.
2. To develop children's skills in creative writing and an imaginative approach to heritage.
3. To give participants the opportunity to learn about the heritage of English folksong, and to learn a number of traditional English songs.
4. To share what we have learned about the Penny Black's heritage by developing a cantata for performance in Kidderminster Town Hall.
5. To give a wider audience the chance to learn about the Penny Black's heritage.
6. To develop documentation that helps teachers in other schools to use music and creative writing to explore aspects of our heritage.



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## **The checklist**

Below is a list of the elements involved in the project, in the order in which we tackled them. Further information on each element follows the list.

1. Choose a theme for your project.
2. Research the theme, gathering information and ideas.
3. Choose music to illustrate and accompany the theme
4. Carry out creative writing activities, based on the information you have collected.
5. Write a script.
6. Rehearse the script and the music.
7. Perform, record and edit the podcast.
8. Upload the podcast.

### **1. Choosing a theme**

It is important to choose a theme that is appealing to young people, and can be explored in some depth. We chose to base our project on Rowland Hill, who was born in Kidderminster and who was the inventor of the world's first universal pre-paid postal system, established in 1840.

### **2. Researching the theme**

We thought it was important for the primary school children to have the opportunity to find out about Rowland Hill and the Victorian postal service for themselves. We invited a Learning Officer from the British Postal Museum and Archive to run workshops with the children involved in the project. The Learning Officer introduced children to the history and heritage of the postal service, giving them the chance to dress up in a



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Victorian postal worker's uniform, to try their hand at 'cross-writing', and to look at real stamps, including the Penny Black.

The children also visited the Victorian Post Office at Blists Hill museum, where they learned more about how people sent and received letters in Victorian times, tried writing with a quill and looked at the bicycles and other vehicles used to deliver the mail.

Throughout the project, the children kept journals recording what they had learned and what they had enjoyed. They wrote in their journals about their experiences during the workshops and the visit to Blists Hill.

### **3. Choosing music to illustrate and accompany the theme**

Because Rowland Hill's invention revolutionised communication, we decided that the spoken part of our podcast would be made up of letters written by the children. The fact that the invention of the Penny Black allowed the *sender* of the letter to pay a fixed amount to post a letter, rather than the *receiver* of the letter having to pay on delivery, meant that letter writing was made far more accessible to less wealthy members of Victorian society. This, in turn, spawned a growth in literacy amongst the Victorian working classes. With these facts in mind, we decided to focus the musical element of our project on folk songs from Victorian times or earlier. We chose songs that explored the separation of family, friends or lovers, by distance and bereavement. Below is a list of the songs we chose, and a summary of their themes.

**The Oak and the Ash** A young woman travels from her northern home to work in London and misses her family and the northern landscape.



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**The Ash Grove** The narrator remembers the Ash Grove, where s/he played as a child, and the friends of his/her childhood.

**Botany Bay** A song of convicts being transported.

**The Girl I Left behind me** A soldier leaves his sweetheart to go off on duty.

**Rio Grande** A sea shanty about leaving Liverpool and setting off for South America.

**Spanish Ladies** A sea shanty about returning to England from overseas.

**Cotton Mill Girls** Girls leave their country homes to work in a cotton mill.

**The Water of Tyne** Lovers are separated by the river.

#### **4. Writing letters**

Each class involved in the project took part in a workshop led jointly by the musician and the writer. The children learned one or two of the chosen songs, and looked at the stories that they told. They then worked with the writer to imagine the thoughts and feelings of the characters featured in the songs and wrote letters to and from these characters. They included extracts from these letters in their journals.

#### **5. Writing a script**

The writer took away the children's work and crafted it into a script for the podcast. He decided to weave the children's letters and ideas into a story about an engaged couple, who are separated when the fiancé goes on military service and travels round the world. This proved a successful way of giving the podcast cohesion.

#### **6. Rehearse the script and the music**



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We decided to contract professional actors to read the letters in both the live performance and on the recording. This was mainly because the live performance took place in a large venue, in which it would have been difficult for the children (aged 7 to 10) to project, even with the help of a PA system. In a smaller venue, and with enough rehearsal time, it would be possible for the children to read parts of the script. We were fortunate to have sufficient funding to contract a professional producer to work with the actors on the script.

The musical director of Wyre Forest Young Voices worked with the choir and the primary school children to rehearse the songs. He wrote new arrangements of each song, giving the choir interesting and challenging harmony parts, while the primary school children sang the melodies. We ran a twilight training evening for the teachers of the classes involved, where we taught the songs and ran through some of the possible challenges that the children might face in learning them. We also recorded a rehearsal CD, containing recordings of each song together with a backing track, to help the children practise the songs in school. The children learned the words of the songs by heart.

## **7. Perform, Record and edit the text and the music**

Our performance took place in Kidderminster Town Hall, to a capacity audience. Over 80 primary school children joined Wyre Forest Young Voices and Primary Chords to sing all eight of the songs featured in the Cantata. We were fortunate to be able to contract the Carnival Band to accompany the songs, which greatly enhanced the performance. It would be possible to organise a smaller-scale performance without the input of a youth choir, with piano accompaniment, and simpler arrangements of the songs. In such circumstances, a primary school could successfully manage an in-house performance.



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We recorded the script and the music at two separate recording sessions. The script, which involved just the two actors, was recorded in a studio, while the songs were recorded in the performing arts suite of a local secondary school. This venue was much bigger than a typical studio and could accommodate the number of young people involved. It took a day to record the script. The songs were recorded over a Friday evening and all day the following Saturday. We contracted a professional sound designer to record and edit the podcast. This undoubtedly resulted in an extremely high-quality product. It would be possible, however, to make a successful recording with more limited resources. Computer-based recording and editing software and some good quality microphones would enable a school to make its own recording of a script and songs.

#### **8. Upload the podcast**

We uploaded the podcast on our own website and as a free download on iTunes. We also encouraged our partners (such as The British Postal Museum and Archive and the Carnival Band) to upload the podcast or create links to it from their own websites.