Cabinets of Curiosity

A Key Stage 3 History resource

Canterbury Cathedral Archives, 2008
Cabinets of Curiosity is a history resource for Key Stage 3.

It uses objects and primary sources from the Bargrave collection, a 17th century Cabinet of Curiosity created by John Bargrave and stored at Canterbury Cathedral Archive.

The resource is a loan pack of replica objects and photos of original objects with information, copies of diary excerpts, copies of object labels with transcripts, and a photo of the original cabinets. Supplementary notes include background information and suggestions for teaching.

Suggestions for teaching are based around the history programme of study, and are given as ideas rather than set lesson plans. This allows for flexibility in planning around the resource. There is scope for creative planning and curriculum opportunities in:

- Relating local history to the broader historical context
- Investigating the role of museums and archives in preserving the past
- Using ICT to research information about the past, and to help sort, organise and present information
- Linking history to other subjects, particularly ICT, English and Art and Design
Using the resource

The *Cabinets of Curiosity* resource can be used to take a thematic approach based around the History programme of study:

- Investigating the life and beliefs of John Bargrave, and using that investigation to develop a sense of the English Civil War period;
- Using the Bargrave collection to develop skills for using objects and documents; skills for using these as evidence of the past and evaluating sources to communicate about the past;
- Understanding the processes of collecting, and the role of collectors, museums and archives in preserving and interpreting the past.

There is also an opportunity for a longer ICT project, *Your Cabinet of Curiosity*, which requires students to select objects, record, store and sort information about them, and present it as a PowerPoint presentation. This project builds on several of the activities suggested in the thematic approach.

Further resources

For more information about Bargrave and the collection, contact Canterbury Cathedral Archives ([www.canterbury-cathedral.org](http://www.canterbury-cathedral.org))

Other useful resources can be found at:

- [www.campaignformuseums.org.uk](http://www.campaignformuseums.org.uk)
- [www.24hourmuseum.org.uk](http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk)
- [www.show.me.uk](http://www.show.me.uk)
- [www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk)
- [www.nationalgallery.org.uk](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk)
The Bargrave Collection

John Bargrave was born near to Canterbury in 1610 and was the son of an established Kent family. He was educated at King’s School, Canterbury from where he proceeded to Cambridge and to a fellowship at Peterhouse. He was ejected in 1643 because of his high church sentiments and royalist tendencies, but resumed his fellowship in the 1660’s at the Restoration. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1662, and was later made a Canon of Canterbury.

Bargrave spent the period 1646-1660 as a travelling tutor on the continent, and undertook four Grand Tours as well as visits to Rome and Naples. His travels included other parts of Europe such as Austria, France and Germany. He also visited Africa. He returned to England in 1660 on the Restoration of the monarchy.

Three wooden cabinets exist to house his collection, which consists of some 200 objects, with a further large collection of coins. The largest cabinet was constructed in order to house the loose objects. Other objects stood on the shelves for display, rather than being stored in the drawers.

Taken as a whole, the collection is highly significant, reflecting standards and tastes of collecting at the time. Some individual items are very important examples of their type.

The Bargrave ‘cabinets of curiosities’ are comparable to the Tradescant Collection, held at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

Cabinets of Curiosity

Cabinets of Curiosity were collected by lots of different people, from royalty and scholars to inn keepers. They were popular all over Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. Different people collected according to their own interests and opportunity, so some are collections of anatomical or botanical items, others are of postcards, prints and art.

They are thought of as the precursors to museums, as the objects were collected, classified and displayed in that way. They also had an educational function, just as museums do, to explore and share the knowledge accumulated by object research. The major difference to a modern museum is that Cabinets remained in private hands and were not generally made available to the public.

The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford inherited a collection largely derived from the Tradescant family. Parts of this are still displayed together, giving a good sense of the diversity of these collections. The collection of Sir Hans Sloane started the collections at the British Museum in London.
The Grand Tour

This was a popular rite of passage journey undertaken by wealthy young men in Europe. The tradition may have its origins in the 16th Century, but became more popular in the 17th century, particularly after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, only declining with the advent of mass rail travel in the 19th century.

The idea of travelling for curiosity and learning was emerging during the 17th century, and was opportune for young men of both royalist and parliamentarian families who felt the necessity to exile themselves from the domestic situation of the Civil War, at the same time as broadening their horizons.

The Tour itself followed a standard itinerary that mapped the cultural achievements of ancient antiquity and the renaissance, as well fashionable society destinations. A Tour could last several months to several years, and generally took in France, Switzerland, major cities in Italy, and sometimes Greece on the way south, and then the Alps, Germany, Austria and Holland on the way back to England.
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1. Life and beliefs of John Bargrave

John Bargrave was in exile from 1646 to 1660. It was self imposed because of his high church and royalist tendencies made it difficult for him to remain in England at the time. During his exile he completed the Grand Tour, travelling around Europe and beyond, collecting the objects in his cabinets of curiosity. He returned to England on the Reformation after which he was ordained and went on to become a Canon of Canterbury Cathedral.

Suggestions for discussion and activities

1. Research into the political and religious situation of the time, including the situation locally to explore the reasons why Bargrave felt he had to exile himself. You could present this as a series of local news bulletins or newspaper articles, outlining the national and local situation and the developing situation up until the point of Bargrave’s departure in 1646. How common was self-exile? Did other exiles all have the same political and religious beliefs? This could lead to a class debate with different groups researching and making the opposing political arguments.

2. Building on previous research, divide the class into two groups. One group thinks of reasons supporting Bargrave’s exile, the other group finds reasons against. You may need to conduct more research into the wider political and religious situation, and into Bargrave’s personal situation. Line the groups up opposite each other with room between the two lines for someone to walk through. Select one person to be Bargrave. As Bargrave walks through the middle of conscience alley, each class member gives him a piece of advice about the exile.

3. A series of hot seating activities could be based around Bargrave’s decision to exile himself, his Grand Tour, and his return to England in 1660.

4. Discuss the Grand Tour. Why did people take the Tour? Would there be an equivalent today? Research and map out the Grand Tour route and label your map with details of the journey, and the significance of stop-off points.

5. Illustrate the events in Bargrave’s life as a comic strip or sequence of newspaper reports.
2. The Bargrave Collection

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### Suggestions for discussion and activities

1. Try some close observation activities using the replica objects and photos. These develop a focus on details and an awareness of how to ask questions of objects and documents. They may also suggest ways that objects can be used as evidence of the past.

   Use the replica objects to make your own copies (sketches, digital images, remodelling). Label your image or model with captions based on physical features, function, design, construction, value. You could develop this into creating a sketchbook of the objects, sketching them from differing angles, detail and scale.

   Working in pairs, one student chooses an object (replica or photo), and sits back to back with their partner. The partner has 20 questions to ask in order to guess which object it is, but the partner can only give answers in response to questions.

   Working in pairs again, one student chooses an object (replica or photo), and sits back to back with their partner. The person with the object describes it freely to their partner who tries to build up an idea (it could be a mental image, drawing or model) of the object from the description.

2. Match replica objects with their written documentation (labels, diary entries). How does this extend our knowledge of the object, its history, and its potential as a source of evidence about the past? How complete is this picture of the past? How can we find out more?

   Rewrite a label or diary extract. This focuses on detail of the text as well as its form. This will develop an idea of what type of source it is and raise questions about its reliability as evidence of the past.

3. Research your own secondary source material to deepen your understanding of the objects. Bring together your research with the information you already have, making clear primary and secondary sources, so that you build up a resource bank of evidence.

4. Following on from the previous activities discuss the questions that can be answered using the objects as evidence.
3. Collecting and its legacy

Objectives: Understand the processes of collecting, and the role of collectors, museums and archives in preserving and interpreting the past;

Curriculum: History, ICT, English

Resource: cabinets, photos, replica objects

Suggestions for discussion and activities

1. Use the cabinets of curiosity to introduce the concept of collecting in the past. Introduce Bargrave, and ask for suggestions on what might be in the cabinets and reasons for these suggestions. This can be developed into an investigation into other cabinet of curiosity collections and the museums they founded. Groups could prepare a presentation or webpage on each museum founded on a cabinet collection. A visit to one of these may be possible.

2. Brainstorm the methods of collecting, including how we acquire our own and how museums acquire their collections. You could use eBay as a starting reference for buying at auction, and could prepare to enter objects into an auction remembering the need to describe everything in detail including historical significance. You could consider archaeological objects and mock up a dig, using a sand box, and using recording and surveying techniques. Also consider how museums can collect memories, sounds, voices, and their significance and how they can be used in display.

3. Brainstorm the different meanings of value (monetary, symbolic, social, historical etc). You may need to think about the people who made the object and the significance it had to them, as well as its museum (or collection) and cultural identity.

4. Discuss the role of museums in preserving the past. How do museums decide what to collect and what to display? You may be able to visit a local, regional or national museum, or correspond with a curator to ask questions. If you can visit an exhibition, you might want to think about who the intended audience is, and evaluate the success of the exhibition.

5. Consider the ethics of collecting. Are there some objects that are inappropriate to collect? What would those be? Are there any in Bargrave’s collection? If similar objects are already in museum collections, what should be done with them? This could lead to a debate about repatriation of objects, or the display of human remains, or cultural or political sensitive objects.
4. Your Cabinet of Curiosity

Objective: Use the Bargrave resource to select and interpret objects and prepare a group PowerPoint presentation

Curriculum: History, ICT; Art and design

Resource: replica objects, photos, diary, labels

This is the outline for a longer group project using history and ICT to explore the processes of collecting, from establishing collecting criteria, researching the objects, interpreting the evidence and final display.

Suggested plan

1. Groups familiarise themselves with the objects through a selection of close observation and questioning activities. Groups establish selection criteria to choose at least 5 objects to work with in detail. These are the objects in their Cabinet of Curiosity.

2. Compile and record the primary and secondary sources for their selection of objects. This could be on object record cards or forms designed by the group.

3. Design a database to store the information. Use the database to sort and group objects in ways that suggest their interpretation as evidence of the past. For example, provenance, subject, form etc.

4. Prepare images of the selected objects (and if possible documents). There should be at least one for each object, but could be more to show details of design or to allow seeing the object in the round.

5. Prepare a PowerPoint presentation to showcase the Cabinet of Curiosity, using the images and selected sources. Groups can decide on the theme, but it should be related to using the objects as sources of information about the past. For example, it could be on the Grand Tour, and use objects originating from different countries along the Tour with a map to show the Tour itinerary.

6. Share the Cabinet of Curiosity presentations with the class.