



Mike's Station

Teachers' Pack

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Introduction

Mike's Station (cartoon and storybook) is one of the outcomes on an intergenerational oral history project conducted at Blair Atholl, Perthshire, in 2024. The aim of the project was to gather stories about Blair Atholl station and railway from older people and share these with primary school children in the village, with a view to bringing the community together in a celebration of its railway heritage.

Mike's Station offers learning opportunities for children in primaries 1 to 7 in relation to all eight curricular areas in the Curriculum for Excellence: sciences, languages, maths, expressive art, social studies, technologies, health and well-being and religious and moral education. More specifically, however, it is designed to assist primary school children and their teachers explore a range of issues related to:

1. living and growing up in a community – knowing your area
2. the importance of heritage buildings in a community
3. life and work during the Second World War
4. emigration and returning home again
5. changing experiences of childhood, play and work over time
6. the impact of technology on transport and on lives

Mike's Station is based on the life-story of one older resident. The animation and storybook will be presented at a workshop at Blair Atholl school in May 2024 and at an interactive exhibition in the village hall in August 2024. It will also be made available through our website, **www.blairathollstation.co.uk/**

The project as a whole was funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The storybook was funded by the Struan Trust.

This learning resource has three components:

- An animation/cartoon
- A storybook
- Guidance notes for teachers

The Guidance notes are not specific to particular ages of children. Instead, teachers will be able to pick and mix depending on the abilities and interests of the children in the class, and depending on what specific learning objectives in which the children are currently engaged. It would be great if this resource could develop further – if teachers are able to share their own best practice with others by adding to the resource. Please send an email to: friendsofbastation@gmail.com if you have something you wish to contribute.

Guidance notes for teachers

1. Living and growing up in a community – knowing your area

Mike's story is a unique account of one older person's childhood in the rural village of Blair Atholl in the Highlands of Scotland. In that respect, it will be very different to a childhood of someone who grew up in a city, or in a different country.

But there are parts of this story that will be familiar to children everywhere. These include: the impact of loss and change, the importance of play, and the central role of family. The story also raises a range of social questions and issues that may be developed through conversation and activities with children, such as:

- How long and why do they live here? Did they live somewhere else before?
- What makes a person belong in a community? – what does it mean to call someone an 'insider' and an 'incomer'?
- Mike's grandfather moved to Blair Atholl for a better paid job on the railway. What does this tell us about economic migrants today?
- What changes would the children like to see in their community today?

Possible activities

Ask the children to draw/paint their community, then place themselves and family within this picture

Ask the children to speak to an older person in their family about their journey to Blair Atholl and report back

Take a map of Scotland/UK/the world and explore with the class where their families came from in the past.

Guidance notes for teachers

2. The importance of heritage buildings in a community

The empty stationhouse building in Blair Atholl is in a poor state of repair. It is good to see that the footbridge has recently been fixed and the waiting room repainted, but the signal box still needs to be repainted and the road leading up to the station is full of potholes.

This raises a lot of important questions:

- Does this matter? Who cares?
- What does it mean to say that something is a 'heritage' building? (this raises concepts like tradition, history, the past, and the importance of understanding the past in order to go forward into the future.)
- The Duke's private waiting room was demolished many years ago when its roof became unsafe. What if the current stationhouse had to be pulled down for the same reason?
- Who should be responsible for the care and upkeep of the old buildings in a community?

Possible activities

Ask the children to draw/paint the station – check our website for images first? (blairathollstation.co.uk)

See if the class can name any other heritage buildings in the village? (They include: two old churches with their graveyards, Blair Castle, the old primary school - now a museum, the village hall and armoury, the watermill and the lade, the road bridge, the railway viaduct – anything else?)

Have the children visited them, and if so when and what for? What did they like and not like about them?

Guidance notes for teachers

3. Life and work during the Second World War

In *Mike's Station*, we discover that Mike's mum worked as a clerk at the station. The Highland Railway (and all railway companies at the time) were normally men-only places as far as working was concerned. Women were allowed to work at station hotels and clean the head offices in Inverness, but otherwise, all the work was done by men.

This changed during the First and Second World Wars when women were needed to do jobs previously done by men. Not only were men away fighting in the war, but lots of additional trains went to and from the naval bases at Scapa Flow near Thurso in the North of Scotland, so more railway workers were needed.

It wasn't until the Sex Discrimination Act was passed in 1975 that women and men became more equal as far as work was concerned, but women and men's pay and conditions are still not equal today.

- Was it fair that women were not allowed to work on the railways?
- Are some jobs today still more likely to be done by women or by men? Why is this?
- What can we do about it?

Possible activities

Ask the children to think about all the different jobs that used to be done in the days of steam trains:

stationmasters, engine drivers and firemen, locomotive engineers, clerks, porters and guards, all those working on the railway track and in the signal boxes – and they were all men!

What would they like to be doing when they grow up?

Check out the Emily the Engineer activity book: web address - <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Emily-the-Engineer-Activity-Book-2023.pdf>

Watch a short Pathe film clip of Canadian foresters in the UK in World War 2: web address - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HqG-QMyTZk>

Guidance notes for teachers

4. Emigration and return home again

As *Mike's Station* tells us, his dad was a Canadian forester. He came to Scotland as a volunteer in the Canadian Forestry Corps, which had first been set up in World War One and then was reformed in World War Two. There were 33 Canadian Forestry Corps camps in total, most of them located in Highland Scotland. Mike's dad lived outside Blair Atholl between December 1940 and April 1944 with 200 other Canadian forestry men on a flat piece of land called Black Island. (It is on the road to Bruar, close to the railway bridge over the old A9 road.) The men lived in wooden huts, not tents.

This was not the first time the Black Island had been used for a soldiers' camp. In 1904, it was a camping ground for the Scottish Horse regiment and then again during World War One, between 1914 and 1918, it was used by Canadian forestry men. After the Canadians went home in 1944, the camp was then used for prisoners of war, Italian men who had been captured prisoner by the Allied forces.

The Blair Atholl villagers tried to make the Canadian men feel welcome and invited them to badminton, dances and ceilidhs in the village hall. Mike's mum, Babs Shanto, describes this in one of the *Voices of Atholl* recordings (Atholl Country Life Museum, 2013).

When Mike's dad returned to Canada, his mum had to wait for another 18 months before she was allowed to join him. This must have been difficult in days before social media and new technology. She and the infant Mike travelled on what was called a 'war bride ship', and when they were there, they settled down to a very different life to the one they had left in Blair Atholl. But Mike's dad and mum wanted to come home to Scotland, and did so a few years later.

This story raises lots of interesting questions for discussion. For example:

- What does it tell us about how temporary visitors are treated by the home community? Would the same thing happen today?
- How common is it for those who emigrate to want to return to their place of origin again? And what happens if they are forced to return even though they don't want to or the country is not safe for them?
- What is 'home' and how do we make the place we are living in feel like home?

Possible activities

Ask the children to imagine being on the big ship emigrating to a new country. What would they be feeling and seeing and thinking? Write a story about this.

Guidance notes for teachers

5. Changing childhoods, play and work

One of the most striking things about Mike's story is how freely he was able to move in and out of his grandfather and uncles' work environment at and around the station. There was no sense that the children in the station yard were unwelcome or breaking any rules; they came and went as they pleased, turning engines on the turntable and even hitching lifts on engines. The adults were happy to spend time with them, talking and sharing stories and even sharing their lunches with them. How different that is today!

This again raises interesting questions about:

- Adults and children – are non-family adults able to talk and play with children today?
- The separation between work and play – and how this is now managed
- Kinicare – the role of aunts and uncles, grandparents in children's lives
- The impact of Covid19 on children's play

Possible activities

Ask the children to draw a picture of themselves at play – doing one of the things they like to do best. Where is it? Are there any other people (adults or children) in the picture? Has this always been a favourite play setting for them? Did Covid 19 change this at all?

Chat with a small group about whether they have ever gone to work with one of their parents and what was that like?

Guidance notes for teachers

6. The impact of technology on transport and on lives

Mike's Station demonstrates the impact of the shift from steam to diesel engines, as well as the positives and negatives that went along with this. While the animation portrays Dr Beeching as a 'bad guy', the reality was more complicated, because more people were using cars and less people were using the railways – it's the same today.

The current generation is living through another technological shift, from petrol and diesel to greener technologies in the future. This is likely to mean electrification of the railway line - planned to be by 2040 – if it meets its target. If and when this happens, all the old footbridges on the Highland main line will have to be removed (they will be too short for the new lines) and the signal box will no longer be staffed at Blair Atholl.

The story raises many issues that the children will want to learn about:

- The village of Blair Atholl was a busier place when the main road came through the village. What were the good and bad things about this? And what about the changes ahead?
- What is green energy, and what is active travel?
- What can you do to help the planet in the future?

Possible activities

Learn about how to build a new railway by playing an online game designed for 7-11 year olds:
Web address - <https://network-rail.github.io/connecting-the-railway/>

Play a new online game on sustainability and the environment: Web address - <https://network-rail.github.io/caring-for-our-environment-scenario-games/>

Appendix

1. Brief timeline: The Highland Railway and Blair Atholl Station

Date	Event
Early 1860s	The train line from Perth to Inverness was built and was opened in stages between 1861 and 1863. In preparation for the railway, a dam at Fenderbridge was built. This provided water not just for the steam trains (there was a big water tower beside the level crossing) but also for everyone in the village for the next 100 years.
1863	First train to Blair Athole travelled up from Dunkeld. Small wooden waiting rooms on both platforms. A week later Queen Victoria travelled to the station to visit her friend the Duke of Athole. At this time, the journey from Perth to Inverness took 6 hours.
1865	Railway companies merged to form the Highland Railway. Killiecrankie and Dalnaspidal stations were opened.
1869	The stationhouse building was opened at Blair Atholl.
1871	The gas works came into operation in Blair Atholl.
1873	There were 135 pupils of school age in Blair Atholl, so a new classroom was built in 1875.
1893	Renamed Blair Atholl station
1914-1918	First World War – 25% of Highland railwaymen were killed. Women employed. Canadian foresters camped outside Blair Atholl.
1919	National Union of Railwaymen and the Association of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen went on strike for better hours and pay.
1921	At this time, the Highland Railway was the largest single employer in the region, employing 3,490 people. It provided housing (it had 482 houses) and a job for life, but wages were low and working hours were long.
1923	The Highland Railway became part of the London, Midlands and Scottish Railway (LMS).
1939-1945	Second World War. Women employed. Canadian foresters camped outside Blair Atholl. One job was to cut down trees on Lude Estate land at Black Wood – later council housing and the new school were built there. Children were evacuated from West Downs School, in Winchester to Blair Castle between 1942 and 1946.
1948	Nationalisation of the railway companies – LMS became part of the Scottish Region of British Railways.
1955	Publication of <i>Modernisation and Re-equipment of the British Railways</i> spelt out the end of steam, recommended replacing with electric and diesel traction.
1958-1962	Replacement of steam by diesel traction meant less jobs were needed. The engine shed and turntable at Blair Atholl was closed and bits of double track were made single again.
1963	Dr Beeching's first of two reports, <i>The Reshaping of British Railways</i> was published. Lots of stations closed, including Killiecrankie, Struan and Dalnaspidal. 6000 lines of track disappeared in 1965, including the line to Aberfeldy. Lots of jobs went.
1964	The Duke of Atholl's private waiting room at Blair Atholl was demolished – it was hardly every used by then, and its roof had been sagging and was unsafe.
1965	The post of stationmaster was abolished. Now an area manager looked after several stations. Many stations were gradually unstaffed. The next year, Blair Atholl station ceased taking goods.

1960s-1970s	The North Sea Oil boom meant pressure on the railways taking steel to Nigg where rigs were built. By the late 1970s, double track from Blair Atholl to Dalwhinnie was reinstated to cope with increased traffic
1982	British Rail was split up. ScotRail was created.
1984	Jimmy McBain was the last employee to work at the station, but the signal box remained staffed.
1989	Blair Atholl station was downgraded again and fewer trains stopped here.
1994	Privatisation of the railways again, following the Railways Act 1993 – staff now worked for lots of different employers over the 1990s.
2012	The first of 90 rail shipments of nuclear material from Dounreay in Caithness to Sellafield in Cumbria was made overnight.
2023	Friends of Blair Atholl station was formed, part of ScotRail's Adopt a Station programme. The following year, its oral history project was carried out.
2024	Scotland's Railway was created, bringing together ScotRail with Network Rail (Scotland). (https://scotlandsrailway.com/)
2024	Various improvements were made at Blair Atholl station by Network Rail, including repairs to the footbridge and the waiting room.

2. Further resources, references and reading

Further resources

Check our website for resources: www.blairathollstation.co.uk/

- Information on the history of the station and the railway.
- Podcast interviews with people from a range of backgrounds, talking about the station, the railway and the village.
- Station and railway photographs from the collection of Atholl Country Life Museum.
- 3D images of railway objects.
- YouTube videos on a range of topics, some funny, others more serious.

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