Hall Place Teachers Notes
WWII Sessions:
Codename Santa Fe Historic House Tour
Codebreakers!

Suitable for KS2 students.

Topics covered — Local history – a local case study of life at Hall Place as an outstation for the historic WWII secret Operation Ultra.

WWII: Codename Santa Fe Historic House Tour (60 minutes)

Life during WWII was very different to modern times. This session aims to help children understand some of these differences and the reasoning behind them.

This tour is led by the education officer and will focus on the lives of the American soldiers based at Hall Place during WWII, why they were here, what they were doing and the effect their work (and others like them) had on the war.

Each student will be given a small identity card of one of the American soldiers that lived and worked here to identify with. The card will have the soldier's photo and signature on to help bring them to life. These men will be referred to in the talk and the exhibition for the students listen and look out for.

The tour will go through several rooms of the historic house bringing the GI's to life through physical evidence, rare archive photographs, personal accounts and objects.

Codebreakers! (60 minutes)

This session takes please in the education room. Teachers are asked to bring the associated activity sheet with them to facilitate the session. You will find this sheet on the Hall Place education resources webpage and will need to print off one for each child in your class. https://www.hallplace.org.uk/taught-sessions/

Just like the Americans based at Hall Place, students will be shown how Morse Code works and given the opportunity to construct and decipher their own simple Morse Code messages. There is also the opportunity to tap out their messages on morse code machines and torches (as morse code was also sent via light pulses during the war).

Constructing a Tate's Disk from card comes next (materials provided as part of the session including card templates, scissors and split pins). This was a well-known cypher used during WWII. Again, pupils will have the chance to develop & decipher messages using this more complicated encryption method. The disks are theirs to take away at the end of the session.

Learning outcomes

- What Hall Place looked like during WWII.
- Who lived at Hall Place and why they were here and why it was top secret. Placing them into the wider story of WWII.
- The effects of the Second World War in the local area, nationally and internationally and how a local event effected the world.
- The effect this had on the local community and British culture.
- Using a range of sources including the historic environment, archive photographs, objects and recollections of people alive at the time.
- Understand that different people view historic events differently – that there are multiple perspectives to the same event.
- Consider how people might have thought and felt about different situations.
- Understanding simple yet effective cyphers used during WWII, why they were used and how they worked – using Morse Code and making a secret agent's Tate's Disk cypher.
- Vocabulary of specialist terms – GI, requisitioned, jeeps, allies, axis powers, telegraph, radio waves, Morse Code, cypher, encryption, wireless, WAAFs, teleprinting, teletypists, rationing, bombing, barracks,

Activities

- Students take an identify card of key men stationed at Hall Place during WWII, these men are referred to during the house tour to bring their experiences to life. Assigning facsimile identification cards of key soldiers stationed at Hall Place helps to create a link to the past, engendering empathy and understanding of the soldier's stories.
- Students are asked to get into small groups and are given archive photographs of the house. They are then asked to use/develop their observational skills of architectural features to match the photograph of the past with the house of today. This problem solving exercise is a great way of transporting students back to the past to further their understanding.
- Discuss the sorts of equipment available during WWII, how they were used and who used them – radio waves, telegraph, Morse Code, the Enigma machine.
- The tour ends with a visit to the 'Codename Santa Fe' museum exhibition. Students are tasked with finding objects referred to in the tour, many of which correspond to the men on their identification cards. There are also more archive photos for them to discover.
- Learning two encryption methods (Morse Code & Tates Disk) and the processes to see how they worked, how difficult they were, and all the elements required to code and decipher them.

Evaluation

- The identification cards the students have are referred to throughout the tour, and also during their discovery of the museum exhibition. This results in the group repeatedly referring to their cards, expressing a keener interest in the stories and provoking questions to find out more.
- Interaction with archive photographs, objects and the historic House.
- Studying archive photos and correctly matching/situating them within the historic house using observational clues. This engenders thought provoking discussion between the students as they are absorbed in the task. This is monitored and facilitated by the Education Officer and group adults are encouraged to do so also.
- Discussion and questions between the session leader and members of the group. Students answering questions to check their comprehension.
- Enacting roleplay to show understanding such as completing morse code & Tates disk activities in sequence of key processes.
- Using and building upon the knowledge obtained in the tour to help them with the codebreaking taught session.

Pre & post visit activities

Have you seen our loans box service? We have a WWII box. Visit the Loans Box page on our website to find out more.

Post visit activity

- Continue to code and decode using the skills learnt in the session.
- Continue to use the identity cards and ask your students to write a letter home in the character of their soldier. What can they remember about them and their life at Hall Place? Use the facsimile US military personal letter template – find this amongst the resources for this session at https://www.hallplace.org.uk/taught-sessions/

Background History

The last resident of Hall Place was Lady Limerick. After her death in 1943, the house was used by the U.S. army in connection with the top-secret code-breaking project named ‘Operation Ultra’ (Ultra Secret).

The U.S. Army Special Projects Branch Signal Intelligence Division was set up in Southern England to work with Bletchley Park. Bletchley Park was the headquarters for the top-secret ULTRA project that would eventually break the German Enigma codes.

Hitler believed his Enigma code was unbreakable. The Polish were the first to try and crack it, passing on their hard-won knowledge to the French before Poland was invaded. Once France fell to German occupation in 1940, the British took over. A reliable system for breaking the ever-changing Enigma code was made by British Cryptanalysts working in temporary huts in the grounds of Bletchley Park. However, they didn't do it alone, all the allied nations played a part in this often dangerous but essential secret project.

ULTRA gave an unparallel insight into the workings of the German High Command.

The BRUSA agreement of co-operation in 1943 led to the U.S. and British sharing communication intelligence. As a result, the U.S. created the Special Projects detachments, which were in place by early 1944. The detachment at Hall Place arrived in December 1943 and February 1944. It was fully operational from April 1944.

There were three detachments working on ULTRA - Hall Place (6811th regiment) and Eastcote in Ruislip (6812th regiment) with Bletchley Park (6813th regiment) controlling the operations of these units.

Each unit were specially trained radio operators. It was their duty to listen into German Military radio transmissions and write down everything they heard. What they heard was unintelligible, the German encoded by Enigma sent in Morse code. Their meaningless transcripts were then sent to Bletchley Park.

Hall Place, which was heavily guarded 24 hours a day, as more GI's (American soldiers were called GI's referring to their GI stamped equipment (Government Issue)) arrived at Hall Place from the US, there were two shifts of forty operators working on 20 radio networks. Every night at 2 am the Germans would change their call signals. Although the troops at Hall Place had a phone line to station X (Bletchley Park), they did not know who or where it was.

The work for Operation ULTRA remained a secret for over thirty years after World War II. Work that led to the significant development of computers. Even today the exact nature and role of the Americans in the 'code breaking' war on Hitler has never been officially revealed.

Life at Hall Place

The American troops were living and working at Hall Place whilst the officers were stationed offsite at the Black Prince Pub.

All the main historic features were sealed off and covered to protect them throughout the war, including all the fireplaces, the glorious old ceilings, and the 17th century stair banister. Windows were boarded up and fireplaces could not be used. This meant the house was extremely cold in the winter.

The walls were covered with a coarse canvas made of hemp called burlap and the floor was protected with a temporary red wooden one. Latrines and washing facilities were built outside at the rear of the house.

Bexley suffered numerous bombings during the war and the off-duty GIs would help the wardens/rescue services. In the autumn of 1944, a V2 bomb exploded near Hall Place shattering the windows. Even though it injured one GI, he refused to leave his work until a replacement had picked up the message he was transcribing. Every message was believed to be important; any message could potentially save lives.

Some of the GI's toured around the local area on bikes and found the local people to be excellent hosts. Dances were held at the Black Prince on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

10,000 people were involved in the process of cracking the Enigma codes and the secret was never divulged until quite recently. With their duty at Hall Place complete, many of the GI's were transferred to Germany in 1945 for 'clean-up' operations.