

**PRIMARY BOOKSHELF**

# ***EXPLORATIONS: A Guide to Field Work in the Primary School***



***Stephen Wass***

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Illustrations by  
Nigel Wass

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# *Preface*

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Now that we are in the era of a national curriculum many of the old worries about content and priorities in the curriculum have been removed; there is an expectation that much of the children's work will be based on first-hand experience and investigation. In the past there were times when one had to argue the case for field work quite strongly, now it is clear that children will gain much of their experience and many of their insights away from the classroom.

This book is written in the firm conviction that there are few things that we do in the classroom that cannot be done better out of it. It lays down guidelines about all aspects of working with children outside the immediate school premises, and covers a whole range of problems, from those concerned with working in the local environment to questions arising from planning day trips, to the challenges of residential field weeks based,

perhaps, hundreds of miles away from home. Although written mainly on the basis of work with children in the seven to eleven age range, many of the activities described can, with perhaps some reduction in scale, be successfully applied to infants.

Following some of the tragedies that have befallen school parties in recent years the accent will be very much on safety. However, a continual harping on about the dangers involved makes for rather gloomy reading so I would like to say from the very beginning that with careful planning most aspects of the environment are accessible to children in an atmosphere that is both relaxed and enjoyable. For those who remain unconvinced about the sheer pleasure and excitement of being away with children I have included an account of two particular trips, at the end of the book, to give something of a flavour as to how these things really work out in practice.

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# 1 Introduction

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## The rationale

There will be many points at which the content of the national curriculum is reflected in the destination of any particular outing, for example a study of light and shadow could be undertaken through a visit to a lighthouse or a backstage tour of a local theatre; an understanding of the nature of sedimentary rocks will arise directly from a trip to a suitable cliff face or nearby quarry. However, in addition to providing coverage of specific topics called for by the national curriculum, field study also has a number of other benefits which enhance the overall quality of work in school.

In examining the environment we are giving the children an opportunity to exercise their skills in situations where real problems

have to be solved, especially if they also have a hand in the planning and administration of their excursions. Many children become reluctant learners when they can see little point in what they are doing but put them on a hillside with a compass to navigate by and angles become important; present them with a large amount of factual information about the submarine they are on and note-taking flourishes; present them with a view of a waterfall they have had to spend an hour or two walking to and they will be desperate to measure its height, calculate how much water is pouring over its lip and discover what kind of rock is so soft that it can be carved by running water.

There are so many aspects of the environment that need studying that groups of children, working with their teacher, can

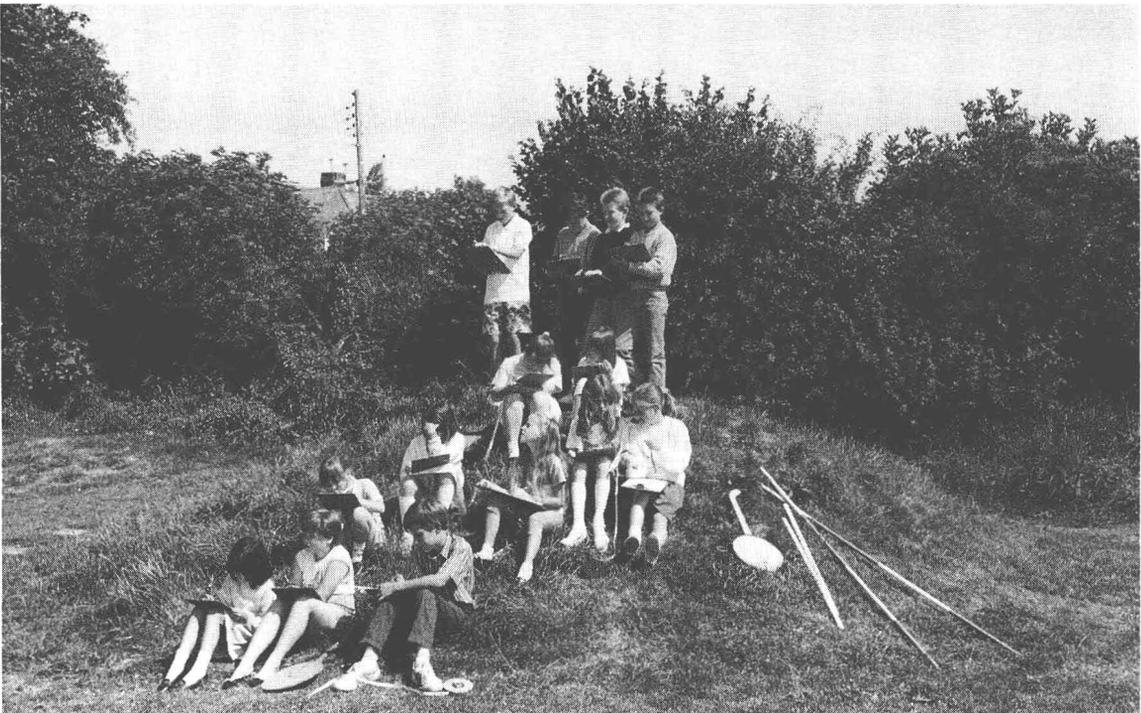


Figure 1.1 *The outdoor 'classroom'*

actually do real research; they can measure, count and record things that many adult researchers would like to examine but do not have the time or the resources to do so. A class of thirty or so children represents a tremendous reservoir of enthusiasm and energy which is often held in check by teachers. With appropriate guidance this can be released in such a way that they may discover Roman towns, record the information on rapidly decaying gravestones or plot the disappearance of species of wild flowers – all these things have been done and more. Taking the next step on from here children are rarely content with studying the environment, they see that there are things to be done too: litter to collect, ponds to dig out, community newsletters to print and circulate.

In taking children out of the classroom we are putting them in touch with authentic experiences which they can respond to in a creative way that can both extend particular skills and foster their personal development. I have seen a group of children act their way up a mountain incorporating the various features of the landscape into their unfolding narrative. Indeed, some of the best poetry I have ever read came from a late night visit to a deserted slate quarry and I have met children so wrapped up in the sketch they were doing of broken glass in an industrial landscape that they missed their lunch!

The experience of being away with a group is also a social one which can bring great enjoyment. Children who one has known only in school often behave in completely unexpected ways when away from home for an extended period. Their personalities unfold in new directions and parents frequently remark on how much more assured and self-reliant their children appear on returning home.

There is also a sense in which the study is valuable in its own right and not just as a vehicle for extending the usual classroom skills. We can all, to a greater or lesser extent 'read' our environments. Everything is where it is for a reason so that our surroundings are the product of a whole series of processes

carried on through time gone by. In this country especially there is very little that can truly be described as 'natural' landscape. Some of our 'wildest' upland areas are in fact 'derelict landscapes', the result of forest clearance during the Bronze Age leading to erosion and depletion of the soil, a kind of prehistoric environmental disaster which is now happening on a larger scale to the tropical rain forests. If we can gain some understanding of the ways in which our environment has been shaped, particularly by people, then we ought to be better equipped to take part in the decision-making processes that effect the future of our world. An historical environmental perspective will not necessarily throw up a solution to every problem, but an understanding of their roots has to go some of the way towards an answer.

As well as examining the benefits for children we should also look at what the teacher gets out of it. Apart from the satisfaction of delivering parts of the curriculum in an exciting and creative way, the teacher will gain endless new insights into the ways in which the class and individuals operate. There is the pleasure of working in new and often very attractive surroundings, the challenge of organising a complex undertaking and the rewards of seeing everything come together satisfactorily. For many teachers it is their first experience of some of the management skills which go into the normal running of the school.

## **The locations**

There are many different locations that can usefully form a venue for a school visit, indeed the opening of new museums is proceeding at a pace that has probably not been seen since the last century. Of course the facilities and support available vary widely depending on the way each particular resource is managed. There are a number of different kinds of provision that you can expect to find once you begin to explore.

Naturally there are many locations which



Figure 1.2 *No matter where they are located all schools have access to an environment that contains much of interest*

exist purely as places, so that any visit has to be self-supporting as it were. Included in this first category are the many geological features which make up the landscape – aspects of the natural environment for example, ponds and streams or areas of moor or woodland as well as the built environment consisting of the many ancient monuments marked on the maps, the churches and houses of our rural communities, the terraces and industrial remains of the large towns and cities and the modern housing estates and shopping centres. Questions of access to these areas are dealt with in the next section, but it needs to be said here that once you move off the public highway, contact with the landowner becomes of great importance.

It is easy to fall into the trap of seeing field work as something which takes place exclusively in the rural environment, but for many schools working close to home means working in urban surroundings. This is not without its difficulties: there is the ever present danger from traffic, the presence of other members of the public and a thousand and one other distractions which may prevent children from getting down to the business in hand, be it drawing a crumbling factory facade or doing a traffic count. So many problems – and yet with a landscape so rich in sites, all within easy access of most schools, it would be very sad if we turned our backs on such fertile ground for exploration purely for the sake of convenience.

In a sense other sites benefit or suffer, depending on your point of view, from the degree of packaging they are subject to. Some have little more than a carpark and ticket office, others are so heavily marketed that they have become part of something called the ‘heritage’ industry. There are a number of agencies responsible for maintaining sites as well as a variety of private commercial concerns.

The National Trust is one of the country’s biggest landowners and has in its care many thousands of acres of land thought worthy of preserving in some way. Much of the land is open to the public all year round and car parking may be available, along with the

occasional informative panel or notice. Details of the sites in their care can be found in the National Trust Handbook, available in most bookshops or else direct from The National Trust, 42 Queen Anne’s Gate, London SW1H 9AS. School parties wishing to book visits can normally obtain discounts on any admission charges of up to 50 per cent, and teachers are normally allowed a free visit in order to plan their activities. The Scottish National Trust based at 5 Charlotte Square, Edinburgh EH2 4DU is responsible for properties north of the border.

In terms of access to the natural countryside the various county-based Naturalists Trusts administer areas of land chosen for their conservation value and often provide interpretative material of a very high standard. Many of them have education officers and some, such as Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Naturalists Trust (BBONT), have produced illustrated guides to their reserves. As they are not always shown on maps, the best course of action in the absence of local knowledge is to address any enquiries to the Nature Conservancy Council at Northminster House, Peterborough PE1 1UA.

English Heritage is an organisation set up by the Government to run those ancient monuments which have been taken into the care of the nation. They range in period from the Neolithic long barrow at Stoney Littleton, Avon, probably some 5000 years old, to the Stott Park Bobbin Mill, Cumbria, which went out of production in 1971. They are responsible for some of the country’s best known tourist attractions such as Stonehenge and The Tower of London, as well as little known sites in remote areas which may only see a handful of visitors from one month to the next.

There are over 350 monuments to which admission is free for school parties. Some of these are open ‘at any reasonable time’ and are free for all. However, there are unlikely to be facilities on the site except for an explanatory notice and perhaps a parking space. Other monuments, for which a charge is normally made, have to be applied to in

advance and a booking form filled in. Standard admission hours apply at most properties. Toilets are generally available on site and there are often small bookstalls where a range of authoritative and informative guidebooks can be purchased. Permission for free entry may sometimes be refused if large numbers of school groups are already expected on a particular day and the free admission rule does not apply at weekends. Full details of all the properties that are open to the public and booking forms can be obtained from: English Heritage, 15–17 Great Marlborough Street, London W1V 1AF. Similar organisations have been set up in Wales and Scotland. CADW is responsible for Welsh historic monuments and is based in Cardiff at Brunel House, 2 Fitzalan Road, CF2 1UY.

The churches are also custodians of an enormous number of historic properties, many of them set within grounds of great interest to the natural historian. The nation's churches represent an astonishingly rich collection of artefacts which are not only

interesting in their own right as works of art or examples of early craftsmanship, but as monuments to the spiritual life of many generations right up to the present day. Unfortunately many churches are kept almost permanently locked, either through fear of vandalism or because one priest is having to minister to several parishes so that individual churches become disused. So, both as a matter of courtesy and organising an open door, it is important to make contact with the local priest. If there is not a local contact pinned to the church noticeboard, information can always be obtained from the diocese office. Many ministers have detailed knowledge of their own church and often make informative and entertaining guides who are used to addressing large groups of people.

On a larger scale, the country's great cathedrals are ideally set up to deal with large numbers of visitors, indeed in some cases they rely on the regular income that tourists bring in to pay their huge maintenance costs, and are generally well supplied with educational support materials. We have always

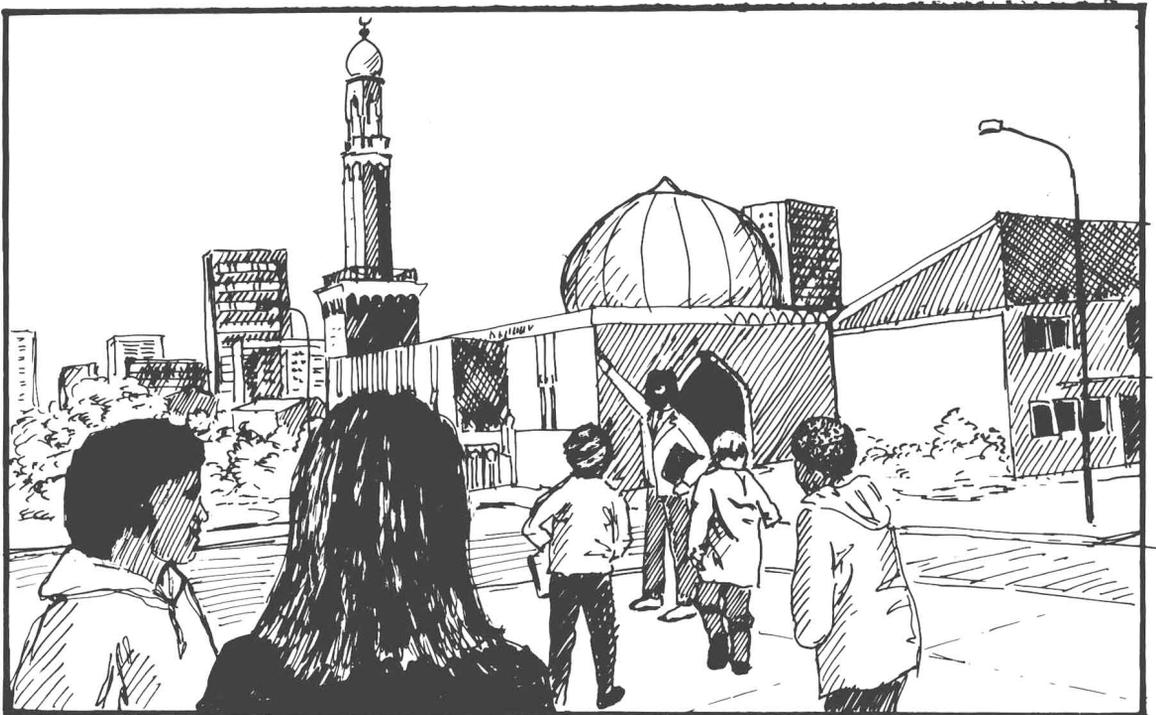


Figure 1.3 *Inner city areas offer chances to explore each other's way of life*

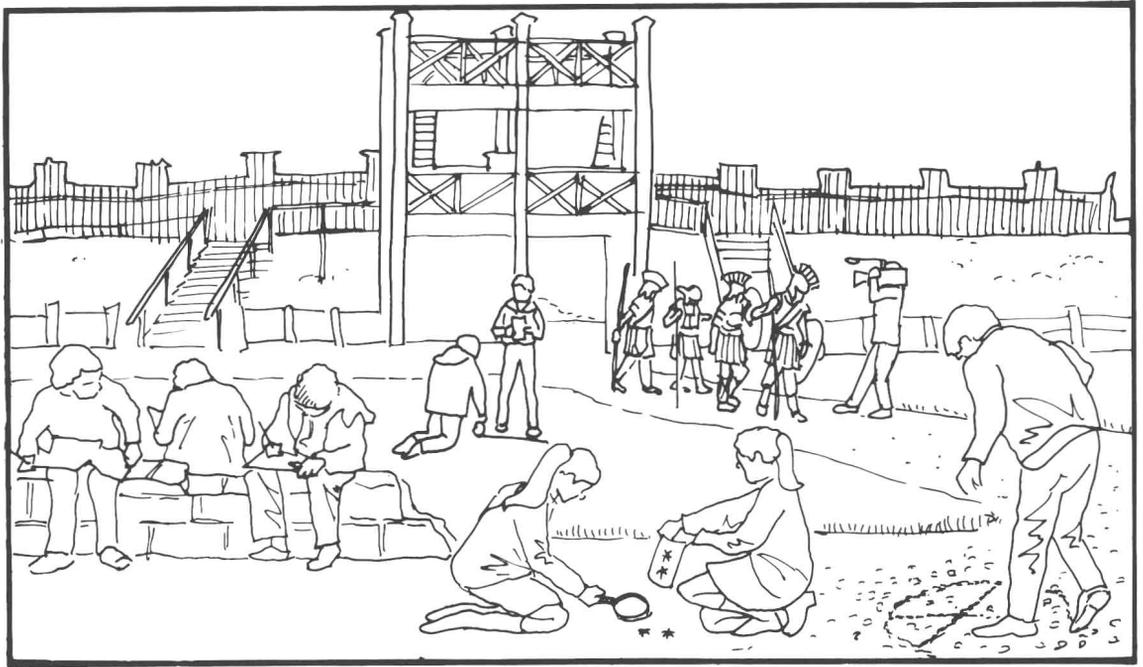


Figure 1.4 *Children can be encouraged to take a variety of approaches to any particular site*

tried in the past to take children along to a church service during the course of any particular study. For many it is a totally novel experience and it reminds them that a church is more than an empty masonry shell. These comments apply of course to all the different Christian denominations as well as other religions who maintain places of worship in this country. Precise attitudes towards school visits may vary but it is always worth making enquiries through leaders of local communities.

Other sites are in the care of local authorities and can include nature reserves or country parks, historic sites and, in particular, museums. The face of the museum service in this country has changed significantly over the past decade; indeed the term museum now covers almost any site where there is some attempt to preserve and/or explain a feature of interest. A new museum is said to be opening practically every week: some are controlled by various charitable trusts and operate on a non-profit making basis whilst others are run on a purely commercial basis.

There are museums for all kinds of things now, often covering quite specialist areas, for example the National Needle Museum, Redditch, The National Horse Racing Museum, Newmarket, and the National Museum of Gypsy Caravans in Pembroke. Many areas which were once centres of massive industrial growth are now busy preserving their industrial past in order to boost their economy and job prospects through tourism. Some concentrate mainly on the technology like the Abbeydale Industrial Hamlet in Sheffield whilst others, such as the Black Country Museum at Dudley, also try to preserve something of aspects of local everyday life and traditions. Actors dressed in appropriate costumes and briefed to 'inhabit the ruins' are becoming commonplace as are special events such as drama days laid on for schools.

Museums offer many different kinds of experience. Some are very controlled as at a North Wales slate mine we visited a couple of years ago. After being issued with their safety helmets the children climbed into a steeply

sloping railcar and were lowered into the depths of the mine. At the bottom there was an old slate miner to greet them with a soft accent and some well chosen words on safety. They were then led through a baffling series of underground workings by carefully positioned lighting and a tape-recorded voice. At various points on the route the party halted and was treated to the sound of actors' voices reliving the experience of working underground, accompanied by suitably evocative background music. At the end of their walk they were lifted back towards the daylight, rather muddy, slightly damp and full of insights and memories.

Other sites offer rather more open-ended experiences, for example, the reconstructed site of a Roman fort in the Midlands. As it happened, through our own faults, there was nobody readily available to talk to us and little information to hand about what was going on. However, the site was an open one and we had come prepared. During the next couple of hours the children put on costumes they had made and we filmed an attack on the gateway and some of the 'soldiers' drilling. The children also collected and identified wildlife living on the fort's rampart and in its ditch. They measured the profile of the defences and made a plan of the foundations of the barrack blocks. They sketched items of military equipment in the small site museum and produced gigantic figures by dragging their feet across the gravel surface of the rebuilt cavalry training ring.

## What to expect

What sort of museum will your visit take you to? If it is the sort of establishment like the fort where you have to supply your own organisation, how are you going to use the site? Are there any staff or printed resources to help you? The situation is open-ended – one of the kind that most teachers are fairly used to exploiting. On the other hand, if the children are to be lectured to, and much of what happens in modern museums is a kind

of lecturing irrespective of the subtlety of the audio-visual support, what kind of message will they be taking home? In these cases one has to look at the content of the museum, much as one would assess a new book on the bookshelf, looking for accuracy, honesty and balance.

With such an enormous range of sites available for visits the problem is largely one of tracking down something that will match with one's wider curricular intentions. As has already been mentioned, the larger national organisations produce guides on what they have on offer right across the country. For the rest, invaluable sources of information are the two booklets produced each year by British Leisure Publications of East Grinstead House, East Grinstead, West Sussex RH19 IXA. These are *Historic Houses, Castles and Gardens Open to the Public* and *Museums and Galleries in Great Britain and Ireland* both of which are revised annually. There are other specialist publications which can be consulted *The Which Heritage Guide* (Consumers Association) is particularly good for its descriptions of the additional facilities available and arrangements for access, but has some inaccuracies in its historical notes. *School Visits, Tours, Outings and Holidays – A Guide*, an annual publication edited by D. Perkins and published by Domino Books, covers some of the same ground but has helpful additional sections dealing with other relevant matters whilst *Kids' Britain* produced for Pan Books by Betty Jerman lists a number of venues with children in mind. The various tourist boards produce a large amount of promotional material and can be questioned about places to visit either through their local tourist information offices or through their regional offices.

Apart from those places that exist specifically to cater for the interested visitor, there are other concerns which have other business to get on with, but which also open certain facilities to school parties. There are a number of large companies which maintain interpretative centres to illustrate the manufacture and benefits of their particular product – but remember most of their

funding probably comes out of the advertising budget. Other places can sometimes be persuaded to open occasionally for an educational visit. Farmers can be particularly helpful if approached about a school visit; indeed your local branch of the National Farmers Union may have a list of those willing to open in this way. Since the Health and Safety at Work Act it has become almost impossible to take young children on tours of working industrial plants, but retailers and those in the service industries can sometimes be persuaded to play host to school parties. We have also been able to negotiate, again on a strictly 'one off' basis, entry into a number

of historic properties still used as family homes. Again, a tactful approach with full explanations and detailed safeguards works wonders in opening otherwise locked doors.

Later sections in this book will look at the questions of detailed planning and organisation on the ground when visiting these sites, but the point needs to be made here that any teacher undertaking a visit to a particular location must be familiar with the place both from an educational and a safety point of view. The vast majority of sites where there is a charge for admission will waive all or part of this for teachers making preliminary visits – so go and see what is out there!

# 2 *Things a Teacher Ought to Know*

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## Training

Teachers who take it upon themselves to lead groups of children out on excursions need to have some additional skills over and above those in everyday use in the classroom. Although much of what happens out of school is an extension of classroom practice, and the same principles of good management apply in both cases, there are some extra points that teachers need to be familiar with.

First, many of the skills needed to move safely around the countryside and to make effective use of its resources are best learned in a practical setting, preferably on a course. Most local authorities run courses for teachers interested in outdoor education, although many of them tend to concentrate on the physical aspects. It is also true, however, that the providers of in-service training have become more responsive to requests from teachers for particular courses, so that if there is nothing available that appears to answer your needs, it is always worth asking for something to be set up, particularly if you can identify a group of teachers with similar needs.

It is not necessary to be a qualified mountain leader to enjoy being close to mountains, indeed if you are taking children into situations where such a qualification is essential then I would suggest that you are taking on more than is appropriate for primary aged children. Having said that, such courses can be very challenging and rewarding on a personal level and are the best way to really learn about things like map reading, moving safely over difficult country and basic first aid. There are many other outdoor sports-related qualifications which can be studied to give useful background information, but again such activities as canoeing, rock climbing and pot-holing are far better undertaken with much older children.

## Maps

As maps are the basic tools for anyone wanting to find their way around the country, or indeed plan any kind of outdoor activity, we are going to look at what is available and how they may be used in some detail. We are remarkably fortunate in this country to have a standard of map cover that is difficult to beat anywhere else in the world. Of the whole range of maps printed by the Ordnance Survey, there are a number which are of special interest to those planning work out of doors and we shall look at these in detail.

First there are the 1:50 000 scale maps which replaced the old one inch to the mile series. These are known as the 'Landranger Series of Great Britain', the whole country is covered by a network of 204 maps each one covering an area 40 kilometres square. They are enormously useful for getting about the countryside by road and for getting a broad overview of an area in order to pick out features for closer study or to chart the approximate course for walks. Although footpaths are shown, it is not always easy to follow their precise line on the ground, particularly if poorly signposted. For accurate navigation across the countryside one really has to turn to the 1:25 000 scale 'Pathfinder' series. These sheets come in a variety of sizes covering areas from 10 kilometres square to 10 by 20 kilometres, to some much larger sheets which are published for some tourist areas. On these maps the positions of individual buildings are accurately recorded as are the boundaries of individual fields and the routes any footpaths take across them. Then there are those maps at a scale of 1:10 000, which can be used for plotting the results of any planning that you want to do yourself directly onto the map. Alternatively, they will give you representations of features on the ground such as prehistoric earthworks

that will enable you and the children to make sense of the strange humps and bumps around you.

Most education authorities have agreements with the Ordnance Survey to permit the copying of parts of their maps for study purposes. Some of the maps seem to be rather expensive in the shops, and certainly if you need to buy a couple of Landranger maps and perhaps four or five Pathfinders the bill can be a heavy one. However, good maps are not something that should be stinted on as their careful study can save endless time on the ground.

It is worth taking time to become familiar with the conventions of these various maps so that they may be read in the way that musicians read a score or builders a plan.

There are a number of publications which give guidance on the interpretation of maps, but the best way to learn is to actually explore the countryside yourself, map in hand. An important and useful facility with Ordnance Survey maps is that they can be used to refer to particular locations through a system of grid references tied in to a 'National Grid'. Instructions for reading and writing such references are given on each map.

## Rights of way

There are over 120 000 miles of footpaths open to us as well as a number of areas of open countryside to which we have access. All land however marginal or uncared for



Figure 2.1 *The two most useful Ordnance Survey Maps: the Landranger, scale 1:50 000 and the Pathfinder, scale 1:25 000. (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Ordnance Survey, © Crown Copyright.)*

belongs to someone, and much of it is the scene of intense industrial activity on the part of those who earn their living off the land. Public footpaths constitute rights of way so that we may travel across privately owned land. The idea of travelling is an important one, the footpath is a highway and one's rights over it are limited to those connected with making a journey. For example, if the path is blocked in some way you are entitled to take the shortest practicable route around the obstruction, being careful not to cause any damage. You may also remove enough of the blockage to allow yourself free passage although again you must be careful to do as little damage as possible.

If an individual, such as the owner of the land or his agent, tries to bar your way you may firmly but politely continue, but you may not exercise any force against such a person so, in practice, one usually turns back. The presence of any obstruction should be reported to the local highways authority who have a statutory duty to keep the footpaths clear. The question of livestock is a difficult one. The 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act makes it illegal to keep a dangerous bull in a field crossed by a footpath but there are sometimes exceptions to this ruling, so it is quite possible that you may encounter young bulls or bulls together with cows or heifers. In fact crossing any field which contains cattle can prove worrying particularly if the children themselves are unfamiliar with livestock. Adequate planning should always result in an alternative route being available should you feel that either the animals or the children are likely to panic!

In Scotland there are no recognised rights of way but neither is there any law of trespass so that, on the whole, the careful walker may go practically anywhere.

Although footpaths are primarily routes for travelling you may stop to rest, or take refreshment, or enjoy the view or take a photograph, providing you and your party are not causing an obstruction. In a way this limits the amount of work you can do on the line of a footpath: sitting sketching is probably all right, stringing out a ten metre

grid to count the local plant population is not such a good idea. Common sense is the key here. In addition, a landowner may ask you to leave the area if you are disturbing animals, damaging plants or crops or interfering with other people using the land.

On balance, if you plan any extensive investigation on or near private land it is best to obtain the landowner's permission – unfortunately this is sometimes a difficult process. There is no foolproof way to establish who the owner is of any given piece of land; only enquiries on the ground, asking at the post office or pub or contacting the local branch of the National Farmer's Union will help, but even then the person you are put into contact with may only be a tenant and perhaps reluctant to sanction large scale incursions of school parties onto the land. Having said this, once contact has been made with the landowner the relationship can prove an extremely fruitful one with additional facilities and information being made available.

The question of access to moorland and mountainside, beaches and foreshores and areas of common ground and ancient woodland is slightly different. Whilst footpaths only allow you to pass through the countryside, there are places where groups may move around much more freely. These include many areas where agreement exists between landowners and the local authority, areas where access has been established by custom and areas where the landowner has given permission for public use as do the National Trust and the Forestry Commission over the many acres of land they own. In some places there are privately owned country parks and nature trails but here access is often controlled and a fee may be charged.

Many areas of special interest or outstanding beauty have been designated 'National Parks'. The fact that land is included in a National Park does not give automatic right of access, but you are more likely to find marked paths and there will be more guidance as to where you can go safely. Common land, contrary to popular opinion,

is not open to all; usually it is privately owned with certain individuals, the commoners, having rights to use the land in certain ways. However, some commons are owned by local authorities and are therefore set aside for public use. Beaches are owned land although many of them are in the hands of local authorities or access has been established by continual usage. The foreshore, between the lines of high and low tide, normally belongs to the Crown and there is no automatic right of access on foot, although, since there is an absolute right to use a boat upon it when it is covered in water, it is difficult for anyone to keep people off. Most canal towpaths are open as rights of way but some are not and the land actually belongs to the British Waterways Board.

## The Country Code

The Country Code drawn up by the Countryside Commission is a basic guide to correct behaviour that protects the interests of all groups using the countryside. Its main points should be known, understood and applied by all staff and students engaged in field study work.

## Walking

The representation of a footpath on a map is no guarantee that the particular route is a safe one to use at all times. Obviously some are impassable at certain times of the year, whilst others are dangerous because they skirt natural hazards or take you into countryside where it is easy to become lost. So, what basic guidelines can we follow to stay out of trouble when planning walks? Some authorities have tried to lay down almost mathematical formulae to the effect that no school party should venture to heights greater than 400 metres unless a person qualified in mountain leadership is present, although clearly this is a nonsense if the group is standing in a car park admiring the view surrounded by picnic tables and litter bins. The Ordnance Survey have published a set of calculations which enable a group leader to assess the difficulty of a walk on a scale from easy to very strenuous and difficult.

Common sense and experience may be the best guides but even then, accidents happen. One of the principles behind the detailed planning as set out in the next section is to assume that a serious mishap could befall any member of the party at any time, and if so

- Enjoy the countryside and respect its life and work.
- Guard against all risk of fire.
- Fasten all gates.
- Keep your dogs under close control.
- Keep to public footpaths across farmland.
- Use gates and stiles to cross fences hedges and walls.
- Leave livestock, crops and machinery alone.
- Take your litter home.
- Help keep all water clean.
- Protect wildlife, plants and trees.
- Take special care on country roads.
- Make no unnecessary noise.