

THE TOWNSEND-WARNER HISTORY PRIZE 2019

Report on Paper Two

251 candidates qualified for Paper Two this year and congratulations should go to all of them and to their teachers. Nearly all the examinees were able to demonstrate knowledge and some sense of structure in their answers. Many were able to go further than this, writing with conviction, often across a broad range of topics, to achieve five worthwhile answers over the two hour span of the Paper – in itself no mean feat!

In terms of numbers, five schools dominated Paper Two this year: Kings College Junior School Wimbledon, St Paul's Juniors, Summer Fields, The Hall and Westminster Under. All had multiple strong entries, but Westminster Under, with an impressive ten candidates in the top thirty in the final aggregate scores, retains the team prize. However, I should also like to commend scripts from Arnold House, Devonshire House, Hereward House, Marlborough House, Rokeby and Wetherby. They had smaller numbers, but most of their candidates wrote with good knowledge and in the best cases with some flair. Any score of 80 or above reflected not only a paper of impressive historical accuracy, but also a writer of genuine skill and imagination. Well done then to the fourteen who achieved this distinction – from nine different schools!

Especial praise must go to Raphael Leon-Villapalos (Westminster Under), who achieved the relatively unusual feat of winning this competition for a second year. With a commanding total from Paper One (93), he was always going to be hard to beat and in the event his Paper Two was also among the best. He wrote with accuracy and good judgement on themes including Philip II of Spain, the battle of Culloden, the Peninsular War and World War Two, to finish in overall terms well clear of the rest of the field. Also deserving of praise is James O'Connell Nash (The Chorister School, Durham), who finished a worthy runner up, after his fourth place last year. I would also like to mention the excellent papers of Jack van den Heuvel (Marlborough House), Thiv Tharmarasa (Westminster Under) and Rory O'Hare (King's College Junior School, Wimbledon).

Question 1 provided a wide range of topics, from which candidates were asked to choose two to write about. The most popular subjects proved to be Becket, Magna Carta, the Peasants' Revolt, the Dissolution of Monasteries, Queen Mary and the Gunpowder Plot and also from the more modern period, Florence Nightingale and the Berlin Wall. It is tempting in this question to launch into narrative and get carried away, but the best answers managed to convey not only knowledge but also some wider perspective and context as well. An example is this conclusion to an answer on the Great Reform Act of 1832: 'the other steps in the journey, very much like 1832, were not done out of high principle, or commitment to democracy, but because of political pressure from below and political calculation from above.' And I liked the comment of the only candidate who wrote about George Frideric Handel, that 'although not born English, his music became the soundtrack to mid 1700s England.'

Question 2 offered a choice. Although the safer option might seem to be entries from an imaginary diary, written by a famous historical figure, there were plenty of answers which opted for 'advice to my younger self'. King John and Henry VIII were often deemed in need of such guidance. So Henry VIII advised his younger self in one script: 'I don't think you want to become known as the king with six wives, so marry only one!' While another candidate had Elizabeth I writing: 'When I was younger I might have done well to use less of those blasted skin-care products. Really ruined my face!' Another answer was written from the perspective of Charles I: 'I was arrogant and weak and I was punished for it' and 'spending a national budget for personal pleasure is not very wise.' While Napoleon was made to say to his younger self: 'Let the Russians

begin the attack. If not, pack winter clothes ... remember one thing: attack the army, not the country.' Some comments bordered on the generic: 'don't take a passenger seat as the world passes by, but instead be the driver of your own destiny.' While modern fixations were also evident: 'Nothing is off the record ... the press will eat anything up for a story on you.'

In similar vein, diary entries often managed to convey appropriately historical musings, with sometimes a touch of humour. I particularly enjoyed Henry II on Becket: 'he's like the dent in my favourite goblet that won't hammer back into shape.' And Charles V, writing about Luther: 'And now he boasts a wife: he married a nun! This so-called 'individual piety' is outrageous as it has ironically led to him doing something absolutely impious.' Less historically correct perhaps was the script which had Harold noting ominously in his diary before Hastings that his soldiers had 'just seen Halley's Comet'!

Question 3 asked candidates to write a newspaper article, written soon after an important day in history, with an appropriate headline. Among the best were 'English Squashed by Normans at Hastings: Will William be a Conqueror?' and 'Terrible Tudor Terminated', announcing the death of Henry VIII. I also liked 'Gunpowder Plot Was a Damp Squib' and 'The Iron Lady's War'. One answer, on the death of William II, rather dubiously concluded: 'What do you think: accident or assassination? Email us at' Inevitably, modern obsessions were on the minds of some candidates and one writer managed to combine the Brexit Referendum with the Presidential Election of 2016, describing Trump's victory as 'the second hurricane of the year in world politics: Trump's triumph symbolises the dawn of a new politics, a politics with no restraints, promises out of thin air, and the art of insults.'

Question 4 offered a wide range of essay questions and scope to write a full answer. The most popular subjects William I (4b), Henry VIII and Elizabeth I (4d), the English Civil War (4e) and World War Two (4h). 4j also elicited some strong answers on famous scientists and two candidates chose to write about famous relatives. Many writers triumphed over understandable fatigue to produce answers that were genuinely analytical, as well as broad-ranging in theme. Suffice to say, it was a privilege to read so many scripts that evinced enthusiasm for the subject and demonstrated real verve in delivery of argument, as well as a grasp of relevant detail. One writer on how the Romans changed life in Britain (4c) gave examples of Latin words that have entered the English language and added earnestly that 'I could do pages and pages of words like these!' I shall leave the last word, however, to the writer who alluded to Abraham Lincoln's famous 'a house divided against itself cannot stand' speech, which showed 'the dangers of having violently split beliefs in a country.' Ring any bells?

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