

THE TOWNSEND-WARNER HISTORY PRIZE 2020
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Report on Paper Two

This year 69 schools had at least one candidate tackling Paper Two and 17 of these had a representative in the final top thirty list, which combines the scores of Papers One and Two. In the event, however, Westminster Under's heavyweight presence in Paper Two was also reflected in the overall results. Five of their pupils finished in the top ten and they had a total of ten in the top thirty. They convincingly retain the team prize. Nearly all the scripts from this school were well written and the same could also be said of sizeable entries from Dragon School, King's College Junior School Wimbledon, St Paul's Juniors, Summer Fields, The Hall, Twyford and Wetherby. Schools with fewer representatives in Paper Two also produced some excellent scripts. In this category Cargilfield, Cothill House, Devonshire House, Ludgrove, Port Regis, The Mall and The New Beacon led the way.

At the individual level, the clear winner this year was Luke Parker from Westminster Under. Backing up his superb 89 in Paper One, he wrote the best Paper Two answers, which were notable for concise analysis and very accurate detail. There were also fine Paper Two scripts from Alexander Lee (Westminster Under), who came second overall, as well as from Teddy Chesebrough (Devonshire House) and Archie Rowland (King's House). Just behind these four was another able group, comprising Fergus Pim (Cargilfield), Shiv Thakrar (Westminster Under), Benedict Braddock (Dean Close Preparatory), Edward Thomson (The Pilgrims' School) and Blake Morris (The Hall). All of the above scored 80 or above and all deserve praise for their very fine efforts. Having said that, there were many very good papers scoring in the 70s. All these examinees wrote five competent answers in the two hours allotted, showing good grasp of the subject matter and the ability to convey some ideas. This is impressive and I congratulate all of them and their teachers, who are clearly inspiring the next generation.

As usual, Question 1 asked for two answers from a choice of fifty topics. This year the most popular themes turned out to be Boudicca's rebellion, the Bayeux Tapestry, Elizabeth I and Catholicism, Cromwell and the New Model Army and, from the modern era, Dunkirk and also the Start of the Cold War. In Question 1 the key element, in addition to a knowledge of the facts, is relevance. So a general discourse on the life of Oliver Cromwell, barely mentioning the New Model Army, will not really do. Nor should a discussion of the start of the Cold War involve an account of the fall of the Berlin Wall! I enjoyed the comment in one script on Boudicca that 'the Romans ignored her husband's will due to Boudicca's female sexuality.' Rather more appropriate was the considered assessment of Dunkirk which concluded: 'You cannot write about Dunkirk and not mention the immeasurable bravery shown by British civilians, who risked their lives to bring "their boys home".'

Question 2 asked for the story around one from a list of famous historical quotations. Easily the most popular here was Neil Armstrong's remark as he set foot on the surface of the moon.

However, one candidate confused him with his namesake, Lance! In fact, nearly all the quotations received plenty of answers, but there were no takers for 2g: Charles II's comment that 'I am weary of travelling ...' Charles went on to predict that he feared that when his brother became king he 'will be obliged to travel again.'

Question 3 offered candidates a choice of either choosing two historical topics to include in a new history syllabus, or designing their own exhibition round an historical theme. I am glad to say that this question really seemed to spark the imagination of many and there were some great answers. The recommendations I received for topics to include in a history syllabus were as varied as the candidates themselves, but some themes clearly emerged. 'Children need to learn World History', wrote one candidate earnestly, 'rather than one particular country or continent, so as to have understanding of a diverse and multi-ethnic world.' The Greek and Roman civilisations were popular as recommendations, as was the study of revolutions. Thus, the French Revolution would show the attempt to create 'a free and equal society, where no idea is above scrutiny and no person is below dignity.' The British Empire was another popular theme, with most candidates keen to stress that a 'warts and all' approach was needed. One writer thought that 'not only should the greatness of it be taught, but also the darker corners, often kept under the carpet, should be shown daylight.' As another put it: 'although we debatably had good intentions, we harmed many peoples and cultures.'

There was some disagreement about the value of the Norman Conquest as a topic. While one writer claimed that the subject was 'crucial in understanding the origins of this country', another wrote rather wearily: 'at every school I have ever been, the Norman Conquest has been taught, emphasised, then taught again in even greater detail.' I shall leave the last word on this to another writer, who wrote enthusiastically that the events of 1066 were 'like an historically true Game of Thrones'. Among the more imaginative ideas suggested were courses to assess the reliability of evidence and to study the power of propaganda and I particularly liked those who suggested that the nature of leadership, in whatever context, was itself worthy of study.

There was similar imagination shown by many who chose to tackle the alternative option in Question 3, designing their own exhibition. Subject matter was extraordinarily diverse, ranging from the study of individuals like Catherine the Great and Amadeus Mozart, to broad themes like the Silk Road, or the modernisation of Japan. Crime throughout history was another suggested topic, 'not to get people into it, but for them to learn about what people thought was wrong at different times.' Best of all, I thought, was the candidate who suggested an exhibition on the written word through the ages. Some went to great lengths to describe the artefacts and modern computerised devices which their exhibition would deploy and I particularly liked 'the interactive table where everyone would be given a unit to fight with' at the battle of Culloden!

'It all started at a sandwich shop in Sarajevo ... ' began one answer to Question 4, which invited a more extended essay. All fifteen questions on offer found takers, but the most popular theme proved to be the one on the Norman Conquest. The best answers on this topic had to move beyond a merely descriptive account of the battle of Hastings. Other popular questions were on the achievements of Henry VII and on the causes of the English Civil War. There was also the option to write about the achievements and importance of any significant artist, or scientist, or inventor and quite a large number took up the challenge. There were many good essays on scientists such as Huygens, Hooker, Newton, Boyle and Einstein, as well as artists from Leonardo da Vinci to Picasso and one young writer tackled Roy Lichtenstein and the pop art movement.

Overall, there was a great deal to praise in the writing of many candidates. They wrote with substantial knowledge and very often with a level of confidence which belied their tender years. It is always impressive to see such work. Inevitably, sometimes, the degree of control and grasp slips a little. So I was a little startled to read that Anne Boleyn 'entered her court life with a bang. Her King, Henry VIII, became her bow.' I also liked the description of Dunkirk as 'a mass evacuation of France'. But my favourite comment this year is this description of the Boston Tea Party. 'The people of Boston threw their cups of tea into the Boston river. The cup of tea at the time and now represents the British people.' On that note, I'm off to put the kettle on!

Hugh Thompson
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