**THE TOWNSEND-WARNER HISTORY PRIZE 2025**

**REPORT ON PAPER TWO**

245 pupils sat down this year to tackle Paper Two of the Townsend-Warner History Prize and the great majority wrote with competence at the very least and sometimes with remarkably sophisticated understanding. I congratulate all concerned.

There were two especially good Paper Two scripts, from Bodhi Ross (Great Walstead) and Dylan Jethwa (Orley Farm) and the latter did enough to pip Rex Reynolds (Lancing Prep, Worthing) for the top prize overall, despite Reynolds’s remarkable Paper One achievement. Ross wrote with range, maturity and great fluency, while Jethwa’s paper showed tremendous command of historical detail. The team prize this year goes to Westminster Under, with eight of their candidates in the top thirty. St Paul’s Juniors had four and Cothill House had three, while Lambrook, Westminster Cathedral Choir School and Summer Fields had two each. Other schools with strong performances in Paper Two included Belmont Mill Hill, Brighton College Prep, Cargilfield, Ludgrove and Sunningdale.

In a wide range of topics in Question One the most popular subjects proved to be the Domesday Book, King John, the Black Death, the Peasants’ Revolt, Mary I and especially Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon. In the more modern period, the main topics written about were Napoleon’s invasion of Russia, Dunkirk, Pearl Harbour, Stalin and the Second World War and the Vietnam War. As I have written before, I am looking not only for specific knowledge but also for an attempt to place the subject in its wider context, in terms of cause and effect. This was echoed in one summing up of the Vietnam War: ‘It changed the way we looked at warfare, the world order and foreign intervention.’ There were some notably strong individual answers in Question One, including from Sandy Morrison (Devonshire House) on Henry V, Adam Kubicki (Westminster Under) on Jane Austen and from Bodhi Ross (Great Walstead) on the Vietnam War. Elsewhere, I enjoyed the comment that Walpole created the ‘Sinkhole Fund’, the description of Drake as a ‘pirateer’ and the view that the Domesday Book ‘fermented itself in English history.’ Napoleon’s mistake in Russia was that ‘he did not pack for winter’ and suffered ‘brutal gorilla attacks.’ Last, but not least, when he was in trouble, Henry VIII ‘called the pope.’

Question Two invited an imaginary letter to a newspaper, pre-1900, criticizing a particular government policy. This was probably slightly less popular than the alternative option in Question Two, but there were still many excellently outraged offerings. One such letter attacked Cromwell ‘who has actually banned all the things that make life worth living.’ Another letter, criticizing the advance of machinery in the Industrial Revolution, began: ‘I am a Luddite …’ There were several letters attacking the institution of slavery and one of the best, by Bodhi Ross (Great Walstead), described the ex-slave reformer, Olaudah Equiano, as ‘a walking refutation of the myth of racial inferiority.’ On a similar theme, Dylan Jethwa (Orley Farm), wrote impressively on the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) in the USA and Leon Jewkes-Aguirre (Bromsgrove Prep) wrote well on women’s suffrage.

The other option in Question Two was to use a time machine to visit a point in the past and to describe what you saw there. Some of the locations chosen were unusual, such as Nigeria in 1870 and Edo Japan in 1650. Popular destinations were England, in the grip of plague in the late 1340s, London in 1666 and Paris at the time of the French Revolution. Some had fun with the whole concept. ‘I have learned from previous time machine escapades to keep my mouth firmly shut’, wrote one. Another lamented: ‘I wish I hadn’t come here … if only I had paid attention in history.’ One visitor to Elizabethan London in the late 1500s described The Globe theatre as ‘like a rose in a bed of thorns.’ Another actually took in a play at The Globe but objected to female roles being played by actors ‘with Adam’s apples’! The skill was to combine imaginative writing with genuinely plausible historical detail and many writers proved up to the task. Among the best contributions were those from Arthur Pim (Cargilfield), on his visit to the Colosseum in Ancient Rome, Sadie Saklow (Belmont, Mill Hill) on the slave trade, Henry Withnell (Summer Fields), on late Elizabethan London, as well as a superb evocation of a dystopian scene in Victorian London in the 1850s, by Jeremy Dunn (Bedford Prep).

Question Three invited an essay on the changing nature of warfare, or, alternatively, memoir extracts from a famous figure living before 1900. In the warfare question, candidates nearly always knew a good deal, but found it hard to organize their material into a disciplined and analytical format and the weaker answers often failed to link comments to historical examples. Many felt instinctively, however, that rapidly evolving technology was taking the place of sheer numbers, as well as reducing the importance of the individual abilities of leaders. Among the best answers on this topic were those written by Henry Nurton (Walhampton) and by Patrick Howells (The Beacon). In the memoir option, there were some unusual offerings from Tutankhamun, Mark Antony, Belisarius, Botticelli, Atahualpa and ‘mad’ George III. More predictably, there were many memoirs from Elizabeth I, Napoleon and Henry VIII. I particularly enjoyed Henry writing: ‘I recently fell in love with Anne Boleyn, a beautiful Protestant lady.’ Another writer captured several historical themes when an elderly Gladstone confided: ‘I could now focus on helping the fallen women of London and dedicate some time to cutting down trees and not consorting with queens.’

In Question Four, many wrote about William I, with the better scripts not focusing on the battle of Hastings. Elizabeth I was also a very popular choice. The next most popular essay topics were the reasons for Germany’s defeat in World War I (where it was important not to lapse into narrative) and the reasons for the Cold War. Many also chose to write about the origins of Hitler’s policies, with one candidate summing up: ‘His policies were radical, bordering on the ridiculous, but his motives, while categorically illogical, were clear.’ On the same theme of Hitler’s motives, Johnny Liu (Westminster Under) constructed one of the best answers. I was surprised by the significant number who wrote about the changes to Britain brought on by the Industrial Revolution. It is fashionable today to decry many aspects of this process and indeed there were powerful descriptions of some of its associated horrors in answers to Question Three. But one writer was unrepentant: ‘While there are parts of our history that people want to cover up, this is one that we should show off and flaunt, like a Chanel bag’!

Over the past two weeks I have read more than 1200 answers. The scripts are marked, by necessity, to a tight deadline, but I hope I have conveyed here something of their spirit and also how much I have enjoyed the process. It only remains for me to thank all the young writers and the teachers who have taught and obviously inspired them. The subject of history is under assault from many directions, so it remains essential that we continue to teach the subject ‘warts and all’. As one writer put it: ‘knowledge of the past may be an integral part of our identity.’

Hugh Thompson

March 2025