



Cwm Creigiog © Ystad Piper / DACS 2015

# John Piper

## The Mountains of Wales

### Learning Resource



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# Introduction

This learning resource is designed to support teachers and other educators who wish to engage their learners with the work of artist John Piper 1903-1992, especially his drawings and paintings of the mountains of north Wales.

The mountains of north Wales inspired Piper from the early 1940s to the mid-1950s, during which time he rented two cottages in Snowdonia. Using these as a base, he travelled around this landscape capturing the shapes, semi-abstract forms, textures and rich colours of the mountains.

A collection of works by Piper was purchased by Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales in 2014 from a private individual with links to Wales, thanks to the generous support of the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Derek Williams Trust and the Art Fund.

This pack is intended as a private resource and is for educational purposes only. As such, all images included in the pack are for internal use only and may not be copied, distributed or used for any other purposes without appropriate permissions being sought.

## Curriculum Links

This collection of paintings is particularly relevant for art, design and geography projects with ample opportunities for developing literacy skills and links to the Curriculum Cymreig. The activity suggestions are targeted primarily at Key Stage 2 and 3 pupils but can also be adapted for older or younger students.

# About John Piper's Life

## Time Line

**1903** Born in Epsom, Surrey. As a child he would explore the area around his home making records and writing guides.

**1919** Went to Epsom College but didn't enjoy his time there.

**1922** Left college and wanted to become an artist. His father however insisted he join the family law firm.

**1925** His father offered him a partnership at his law firm but he refused. This allowed him to study art at Richmond Adult Community College.

**1928** Entered the Royal College of Art

**1930s** Piper was involved in many different projects. He wrote art and music reviews, and made a series of drawings of Welsh chapels. He also worked on Shell Guides, a series of popular guidebooks to the counties of Britain. His first exhibitions of abstract paintings, collaged landscapes and ruined buildings were very successful. At this time he also met Myfanwy Evans who became his second wife.

**1940** Piper was appointed an official War artist.

**British Neo romanticism, late 1930s and 40s** This was a term applied to Piper and other artists who painted the British landscape in a way that it had not been painted before. The style of painting was considered to be an emotional response to the landscape, and was reflective of its time.

**1940** Piper was given a commission to record cities scarred by the blitz and he began this work at Coventry and Bristol.

**1943** Piper was given a commission by the War Artists Advisory Committee to record the interior of the manmade cavern at Manod Quarry, Blaenau Ffestiniog, which was to be used as a store for National Gallery and Royal Collection paintings during the blitz.

## John Piper and north Wales

Piper was from the south of England, but his second wife Myfanwy Evans was born in London to Welsh parents. The Pipers had been to south Wales before, but in 1939 they stayed at Pontrhydfendigaid, Ceredigion, so he could see and draw Hafod house. During this time he travelled up to mid Wales to see places he had read about in *The Lakes of Wales* by Herbert Jenkins. Piper compared some of the scenes he saw on his visit against historical images painted by Edward Pugh in the illustrated copy of the 1816 guidebook *Cambria Depicta*. All this took place in the summer of 1939 when everyone was dreading a new war.

In November 1940 Piper was appointed an official war artist. He received his first commission to record cities scarred by the blitz, starting in Coventry and then on to Bristol. Although it was this commission that took him away from Wales, it was however a wartime commission that also brought him back, but to the heart of north Wales this time.



In 1943 he received a commission to record the interiors of a man-made cavern in Manod Mawr Mountain which was used as a war-time store for the National Gallery and Royal Collections. The Commission was unsuccessful it was impossible to draw as the caverns were too dark. Piper took the opportunity to look around the area using Murray's *North Wales as a Guide*.

Once the commission ended, Piper decided to stay and paint in north Wales for as long as possible. Along with his family, he returned to north Wales, both during and after the bleak years of the Second World War. They would rent accommodation amongst the remote mountains of Snowdonia. One farmhouse in particular, Bodesi, in the Ogwen Valley, was only available in the winter, and Piper liked the isolated location.

One of the appeals for Piper was that in these places he was out of contact and could spend entire days working in complete isolation. He made a series of prints, drawings and paintings that became a graphic exploration of the mountains. The dark, profoundly emotive images he created there are considered to be amongst his finest works.

## Working Methods and Techniques

- Most of his pictures were drawings rather than paintings, and began as notes in a sketchbook made on the spot in ink, with pen and a brush.
- He enlarged some and worked with a combination of watercolour, gouache, chalk and ink, put on with pen, brush, a sponge, and rubbed with his fingers.
- Sometimes when he went out to places that were easier to get to he drew full size to start with, but most of the big drawings seem to have been made in the studio.
- Only a few of the drawings he used as designs for larger oil paintings.
- Piper loved maps and guide books. He learnt place-names and their geological history, and compared views made by earlier artists with what he could see.
- He, his wife and their two eldest children stayed in cottages in the area for a week or two at a time, occasionally for longer.
- When Piper left the house in the morning he was alone all day, and would often climb to areas above 3000ft high. The mountains are not generally difficult to climb, although they are high and did not have the paths that they do now.
- It was difficult to work high up in the mountains – in wind and frequent rain, sometimes so damp that the paper cockled, or so cold that watercolour froze, and almost too cold to sit still, and always working alone.
- Not one of the drawings look as if they had been made on a sunny day, and the sky is always a mottled grey.

# Preparing for a gallery visit

Before your visit you could familiarise your learners with a selection of different paintings and images of the landscape.

The following are works from the Museum's collection and images can be found at

[www.museumwales.ac.uk/art/online/](http://www.museumwales.ac.uk/art/online/)

Richard Wilson - Dolbadarn Castle, 1760s

Thomas Jones - The Bard, 1774

Thomas Jones - Buildings in Naples, 1782

John Brett - Forest Cove, Cardigan bay 1883

Look at the subject matter and elements such as use of colour, line and texture. Think about what was the artist's main interest and intention in creating these paintings.

John Piper departed from the usual. He painted dramatic scenes, with ruins, rocks and mountains as a focus for this series of work, the mountains of north Wales.

## Talking about Landscape Paintings



**Forest Cove, Cardigan bay**

John Brett

1883 | Oil on canvas

Ask questions to encourage learners to look closely. Begin with very simple questions and dig deeper.

### Content

What can you see in this painting?

What do you notice first when you look at this painting?

What do we call this type of painting?

What's in the foreground, middle and background?

Why do you think the artist chose to paint from this spot?

Are there any people in the painting?  
If not, why?  
If so, what are they doing?

### Weather

Describe the weather in the painting.

What clues tell you about the weather in the painting?

What time of year do you think it is? How can you tell?



**Buildings in Naples**

Thomas Jones

1774 | Oil on canvas



## Dolbadarn Castle

Richard Wilson

1774 | Oil on canvas



## The Bard

Thomas Jones

1774 | Oil on canvas

Why do you think the artist chose to paint the landscape in this weather?

### Process

Do you think the artist created the landscape on the spot?

Why do you think that?

If not, did the artist make it all up?

If so, did he do it all at once or did he go back and forth?

How else could the artist have worked?

Where do you think the artist started?

Do you think it took him/her a long time?

What type of surface can you see?

Is it smooth or is it bumpy?

What affect does this have on the way it looks?

What type of tools and materials do you think he used?

### Mood

How does looking at this painting make you feel?

Think of one word that describes how you feel when you look at this painting.

What is it about the painting that makes you feel that?



# Talking about John Piper Landscapes



Rocks at Capel Curig © ThePiperEstate/DACS

## Rocks at Capel Curig

1950 | Ink, watercolour and gouache, 55.9 x 73.7cm

Walk into the gallery full of John Piper paintings, walk around and look at them all. If you are in the classroom you could look at a digital presentation of paintings by John Piper.

Ask your learners to think –

What can I see?

What are the paintings of?

What colours, shapes and textures can I see?

Once you have gathered the class back together discuss what they saw and their general observations.





Bethesda © ThePiperEstate/DACS

## Bethesda

1945 | Ink and watercolour, 21.6 x 24.1cm

### Content

Piper didn't differentiate between subject matters. He would paint ruins, mountains and rocks with the same care and attention to detail as he would Windsor Castle.

Why do you think Piper painted so many rocks and mountains?

Are they realistic?

Is it easy to tell what's in the paintings?

What makes it easy or hard to tell what's in the paintings?

Why do you think Piper painted in the way he did?

### Weather

Piper ventured into the landscape no matter what the weather. He would draw and sometimes paint for entire days in complete isolation, and the weather could change very quickly.

Look at the paintings. What time of year do you think it was?

How can you tell?

Why do you think he painted in this type of weather?

What challenges do you think he faced?



DevilsKitchen©ThePiperEstate/DACS

## Devil's Kitchen

1946-7 | Ink, watercolour and charcoal on paper, 54.4 x 68.7cm

### Process

John Piper drew and painted on the spot in sometimes extreme conditions and in complete isolation. He sometimes worked from these pieces back at his studio to make much larger works.

Do you think he painted all of these on the spot?

Which ones do and don't look like they have been painted on the spot?

What makes you think this?

Can you see lots of different textures on his paintings? How do you think he created the different textures?





Rise of the Dovey © The Piper Estate/DACS

## Rise of the Dovey

1943-4 | Oil on gessoed canvas mounted on board, 69.3 x 87cm

### Mood

John Piper began painting the mountains of north Wales during the Second World War. They are said to reflect the bleak mood that was felt at this time.

Look at the paintings. In one word, how do the paintings make you feel?

How do you think John Pieper created that mood in his paintings?

Does what he has painted or the way he has painted it contribute to the mood of the painting?



# Rocky Valley

1948 | Oil on canvas on board, 91.4 x 121.9cm



RockyValley©ThePiperEstate/DACS

## Talking about Rocky Valley

This is one of John Piper's more abstract works. Encourage your learners to use their imagination to help them look at and respond to the painting. You could focus on visual elements such as colours, shapes and textures.

### Imagine

What can you see here?

What is the subject of this painting?

How can you tell?

Do you think there is something in this painting you can't see?

Why would Piper hide something?

By hiding something is Piper trying to reveal something?

### Colour

Describe the colours you can see.

Which is the darkest, and which is the lightest part?

Why do you think Piper has painted such dark and light colours?

In the foreground there are stretches of dark red - what could these marks be?

Do you think the reds and browns in the foreground are as dark as the blacks and the blues in the background?

### Shapes

Can you see any shapes?

What could they be?

Can you see any other marks?

What are they of?

## Texture

Piper painted onto a hard and slightly textured surface, and then built up layers of gesso (a thick white paste used to prepare the surface of a painting) and paint and scratched into the paint to create further texture. If you are in a gallery looking at this work ask your learners to look closely at the surface of the painting.

Which adjectives would you use to describe the textures you can see? e.g. Smooth /

rough / bumpy .

What sort of tools do you think Piper used to make these marks?

There are some cracks on the surface – do you think Piper created them or did they just happen over time?

# Head of the Nant Ffrancon Pass, Tryfan, Snowdonia

1947 | Ink, chalk and watercolour, 53.4 x 66.1cm



Head of the Nant Ffrancon Pass ©ThePiperEstate/DACS

## Compare and Contrast

The next painting, *Head of the Nant Ffrancon Pass, Tryfan, Snowdonia* was made a year before *Rocky Valley* in 1947. It's the same landscape most likely from the same viewpoint.

Do you think that both paintings have been painted from the same location?

How can you tell?

What are the similarities and differences?

Is there anything included here ... that he left out in *Rocky Valley*?

Why do you think he did that?

### Shapes

Which painting has the most shapes in it?

Why do you think one has more shapes than the other?

How are the shapes different?

### Colour

Look at *Head of the Nant Ffrancon Pass, Tryfan, Snowdonia* -

Why do you think he chose these colours?

Were they the real colours that he could see in front of him or did he make them up?

If he made them up, why did he choose these colours?

Do you think these colours represent feelings?

If they are the colours he remembered, do you think he exaggerated them?

### Texture

Which one has the most texture?

Why do you think he has made one more textured?

Was it because of the way he was feeling?

Was it because of the materials he was using?

Could it be a combination of these things?

Which of the two paintings do you like the best? Why?



# Nant Ffrancon Farm

1950 | Mixed media on paper, 36 x 53.5cm



Nnant Ffrancon©ThePiperEstate/DACS

## Talking about Nant Ffrancon Ffarm

John Piper and his family stayed in this farmhouse in 1945-46. This isolated farmhouse was very hard to reach and is a good example of how John Piper immersed himself in the landscape.

Unlike Rocky Valley, this painting depicts a scene that is immediately more recognisable. Using different starting points you could work with your learners to build a narrative around this painting.

### Subject

What is the main subject of this painting?

Which part of the painting do you think he spent the most time painting?

Why do you think he spent the most time on that part?

Is there a part of the painting with little or no detail?

### Weather

What type of day was it when this was painted?

Was it wet? Windy? Snowing?

How has John Piper shown us what the weather is like?

After discussing the subject and the weather you can begin to build up a picture of the type of environment where Piper worked and lived.

Why do you think John Piper wanted to stay in this farmhouse?

Do you think he and his family enjoyed being here?

Was he trying to experience more than what he could experience in just a one day visit?

What type of things would he see if he was there longer than a day?

## Compare and Contrast



### Nant Ffrancon Ffarm

2004

This is a photograph of the farmhouse in John Piper's painting. There is a gap of 60 years between the painting and this photograph.

What can you see in both the painting and the photograph?

How are they different?

He lived there with his family - does it look hard to get to? Why?

What do you think it was like staying there?

# Practical ideas inspired by John Piper's

## landscapes - In a Gallery

When preparing a visit to a gallery it is good practice to visit beforehand if possible. You as the teacher might see the potential of an exhibition to complement many areas of your curriculum and schemes of work.

The following ideas however could work to engage your pupils with John Piper's paintings and could also be adapted for other displays and exhibitions.

### Close-ups

Choose a selection of paintings that you will see during your visit and print some reproductions of them. Divide your class into small groups and give them different sections and close-ups from the paintings. Before the visit they could discuss and think about what they can see in their sections.

In the gallery the challenge will be for each group to find the painting that the close-up belongs to.

It does not matter if they discover the right painting or not. The discussion and focus will be about how and why they chose what they did. Each group can explain why they thought their close-up belonged to the painting they chose.

### Descriptions

Descriptions could be a good way to help your learners look closely at paintings. The following sentences describe different Piper paintings of the mountains of north Wales.

Split your class into groups, give each group a sentence and ask them to identify the paintings from the descriptions.

-A dark pool with mountains towering above like great giants. (The Rise of the Dovey)

-Blue mountains with white light shining on the surface of rocks and the red earth below. (Rocky Valley)

-Shapes like bones appear from the earth and dominate the landscape. (Rock Formations)

-Flame coloured earth surrounds the rounded rocks underneath a dark clouded sky. (Rocks at

Capel Curig)

-Frothy white clouds in the dark sky above two large rocks. (Rocks on Tryfan)

-Darkness creeps across the earth's rocky surface whilst the sun shines. (Tryfan Mountain)

-Rows of houses that one-by-one dissolve into the watery landscape. (Bethesda)

-A steep slab of rock stands above a tangle of red, yellow and white. (Jagged Rocks Under Tryfan)

-Thin black lines shape rocks in the blurry landscape. (Near and Far Rocks, Tryfan)

-Lines and splashes of light highlight the valley and the clouds above. (Ffynon Lloer)



## Compare and Contrast

- Choose two paintings for your learners to compare and contrast.



Rocks at Capel Curig © ThePiperEstate/DACS



Rise of the Dovey © ThePiperEstate/DACS



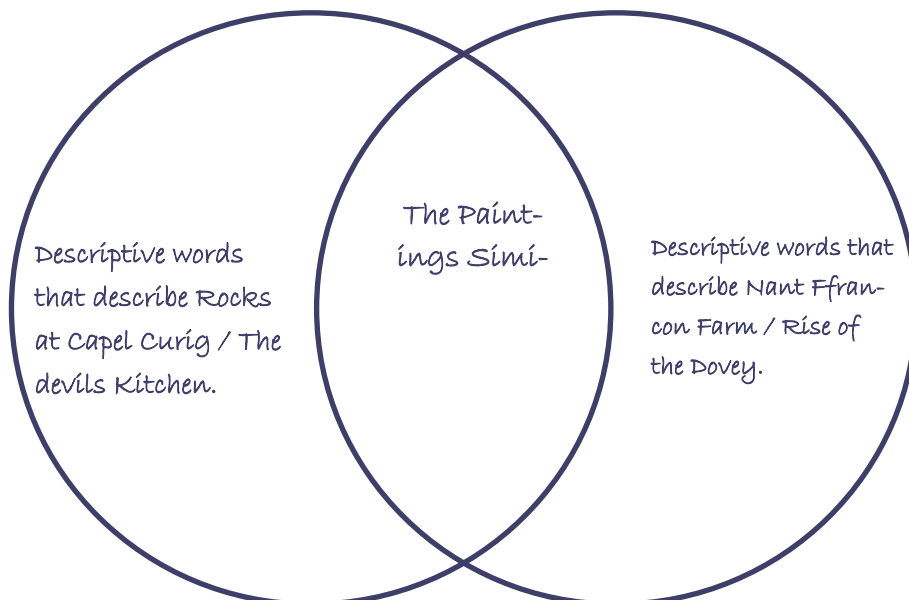
Nant Ffrancon © ThePiperEstate/DACS



Devils Kitchen © ThePiperEstate/DACS

- Split the class into groups and ask them to talk about the similarities and differences.

- They could record their observations on this diagram.



- Gather everyone together for each group to report back.

- Ask individuals to say how the pieces are different, followed by how they are similar.

# Practical ideas inspired by John Piper's landscapes - Back at School

## Drawing

John Piper spent a lot of time out in the environment drawing and painting before going back to his studio to create a finished piece. This activity is designed to help your learners understand this process. This activity is in two parts. It does not have to be done in succession.



Mark making with a graphite stick



## Drawing 'on the Spot'

This is a fast pace fun drawing exercise that will challenge your learners to work **quickly**.

- Take them out of the classroom, it works best when you go for a walk.
- They will need a clip board with two pieces of paper, one divided into 4 parts

They will need the paper divided into 4 first.

- Tell them that, at any moment during the walk you are going to shout STOP!
- When you do, they have 1 minute to draw everything that they can see on the ground in one part of the paper. Encourage them to completely fill the space.
- Carry on with your walk and repeat this 3 more times. The second time they STOP ask them to draw everything they can see when they look up. The third time they STOP ask them to draw everything in front of them, The fourth time they STOP ask them to draw something they can see close up. Each time they stop they are only given 1 minute to complete their drawing.
- Repeat this exercise again, but instruct them to use the bigger piece of paper and allow them 4 minutes.
- They can draw anything they like this time.
- Challenge them to use as much energy as they can to fill the paper. They can move around whilst they do it.
- Materials: pencils, graphite sticks (if you have them), crayon, paper and clip boards.





## Drawing from Memory and Imagination

Back in the classroom, ask your learners to use their drawings as inspiration for a new piece of work, making it bigger and more colourful.

- They can copy their drawings, use their memory and their imagination.
- How long and what materials you supply your learners with is entirely your decision. Why not challenge them to finish it within a set time.
- When they have finished, ask them to describe their pieces and talk about the journey of their work and its inspiration.





# Collage

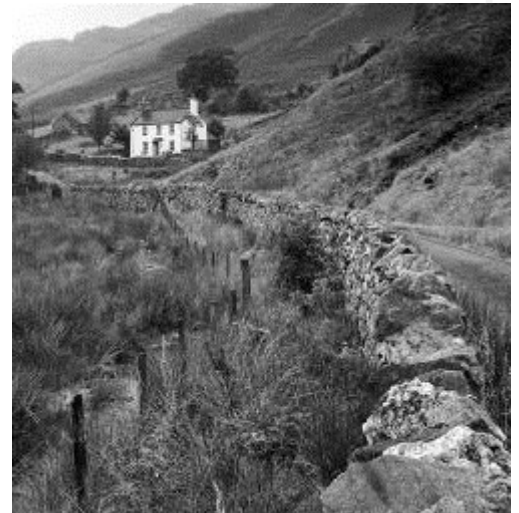
This activity is designed to help your learners develop a better understanding of abstraction. Abstract art has no immediately recognisable subject matter and is usually an arrangement of shapes, colours and textures.

Piper was known as an abstract artist in the early part of his career but moved away from this type of non-representational art by the end of the 1930s.

Some of John Piper's paintings and drawings of the mountains of north Wales can seem quite abstract at first glance, however, when you look closer you will recognise aspects of the landscape. When compared with photographs of the places that inspired Piper's landscapes you can see that he has been very accurate in his painting of certain mountains and rocks.



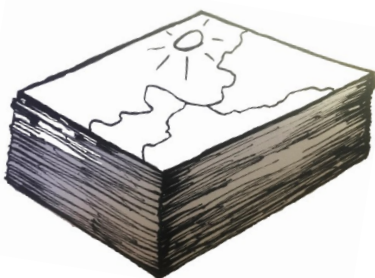
Nnant Ffroncon © ThePiperEstate/DACS



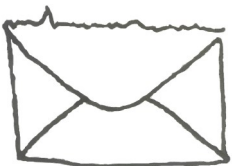
## To Start the Collage...

-Each pupil / groups need photographs of different landscapes, plain sheets of white paper and glue, a mixed bag of different papers such as.... Tissue paper, coloured paper, newspaper, used envelopes, already painted paper etc....

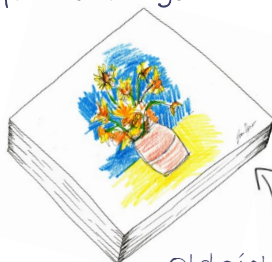
Things you will need...



Things you could use for the collage...



Old Envelopes



Old pictures



News papers



Different types of paper

- Ask your learners to interpret or copy the landscape using only these materials.

- They are not allowed pencils, pens, paint or scissors. By not allowing these they will be forced to think differently about how they represent different shapes, textures, lines and colours.

- They could also use their imaginations to further abstract their collages.

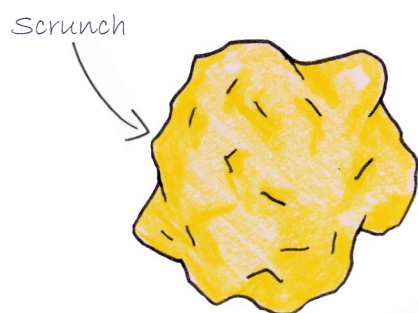
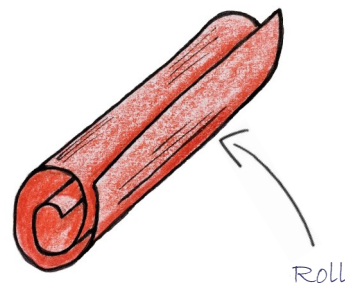
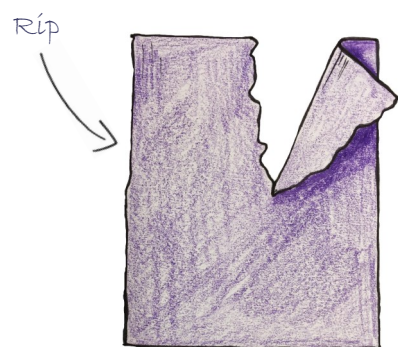
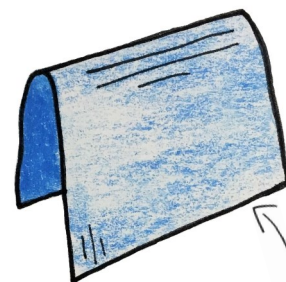
This activity can be done independently or in groups of about three.

- If it is a group activity give your learners a bigger piece of plain paper so they have more space to work on.



Collage made by a group of Yr. 9 pupils

## Making textures with paper





## Making your own guide book

By making their own guide book learners will develop their understanding of how Piper approached the landscape. It could also be a good way for children and young people to bring work from other curriculum areas together into a body of work.

### Piper's Guide Books

Throughout his life Piper loved guide books, both reading and making them. Having spent his childhood making guides of the area around his home, it's fitting that early in his career he was approached by the poet John Betjeman to write and illustrate the *Shell Guide to Oxfordshire*. They then went on to collaborate and write *The Shell Guide to Shropshire*.

Piper came to north Wales first of all to record

the interior of the Manod Mawr quarry near Blaenau Ffestiniog. Paintings from the National Gallery were stored there for safe keeping during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. This commission wasn't a success – Piper couldn't see inside the quarry because it was too dark. He took the opportunity to explore the local area using Murray's *Travellers Guide to North Wales*. He also acquired an extra illustrated copy of *Cambria Depicta* by Edward Pugh, first published in 1816. Edward Pugh spent his life, both writing and illustrating *Cambria Depicta*. Born in Ruthin and a native Welsh speaker, he would follow the tourist trail and talk to as many places as he could. His guide book, *Cambria Depicta* is considered to be the best account of north Wales written during this time.

John Piper travelled around comparing Edward Pugh's historic prints against the landscape. He even made a print in the style of Edward Pugh.

### Edward Pugh

1816 | Engravings



### Trawsaltt

1939 | Monotype, 40.6 x 50.8cm





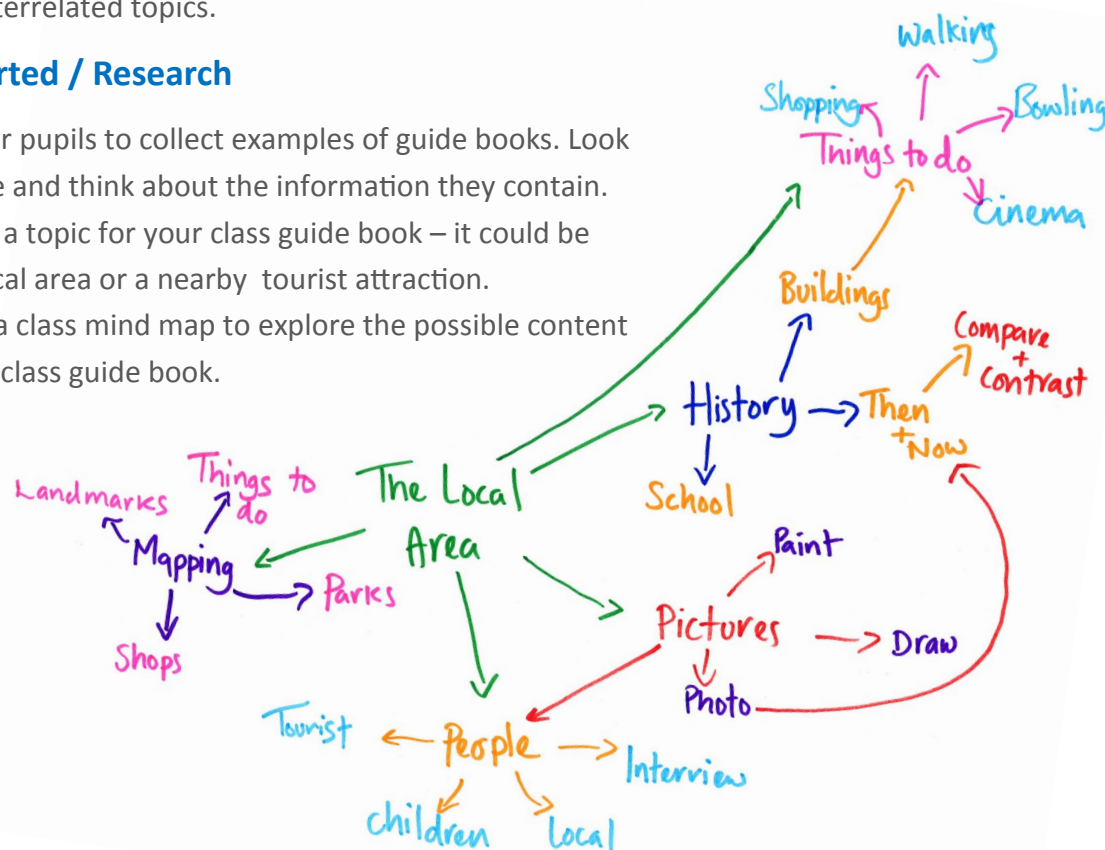
## A guide book for children by children

The subject of the guide book could be for anything or anywhere.

It could be as brief or as in depth as you like. You could spend a day and focus on one topic or a whole term and draw from a number of interrelated topics.

### Getting Started / Research

- Ask your pupils to collect examples of guide books. Look at these and think about the information they contain. Choose a topic for your class guide book – it could be your local area or a nearby tourist attraction.
- Create a class mind map to explore the possible content of your class guide book.



- Design a layout page for the children to use. Use an A4 pieces of paper in landscape format, this will form a two page spread. These are some examples.

- Assign tasks for small groups of pupils and ask each pupil to create a page. The tasks could include some or all of the following activities -

Researching

Writing

Drawing Maps

Writing instructions

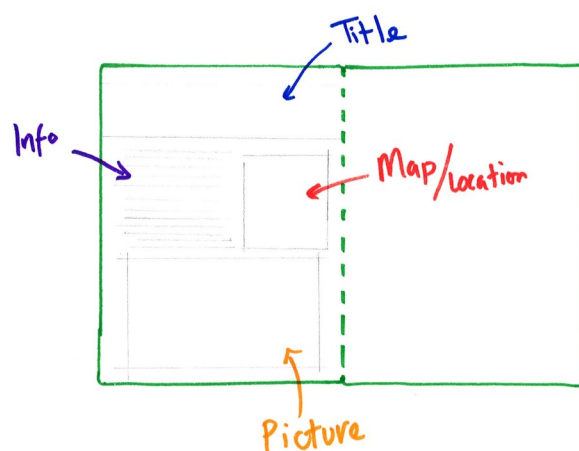
Taking photographs

Drawing illustrations

Interviewing a local person about the area

Reviewing a local attraction

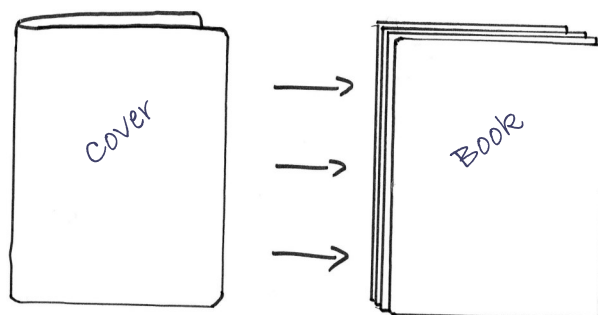
Creating the Cover



## Producing the final work

Once all the topics have been completed and the pages are ready, the book will need a cover and a content page. There are 3 simple ways to bind your class guide book together. If you use the 1<sup>st</sup> method, make sure you leave a 1cm gap along the left hand length of the page to create the spine

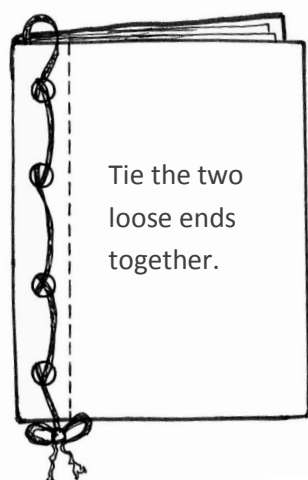
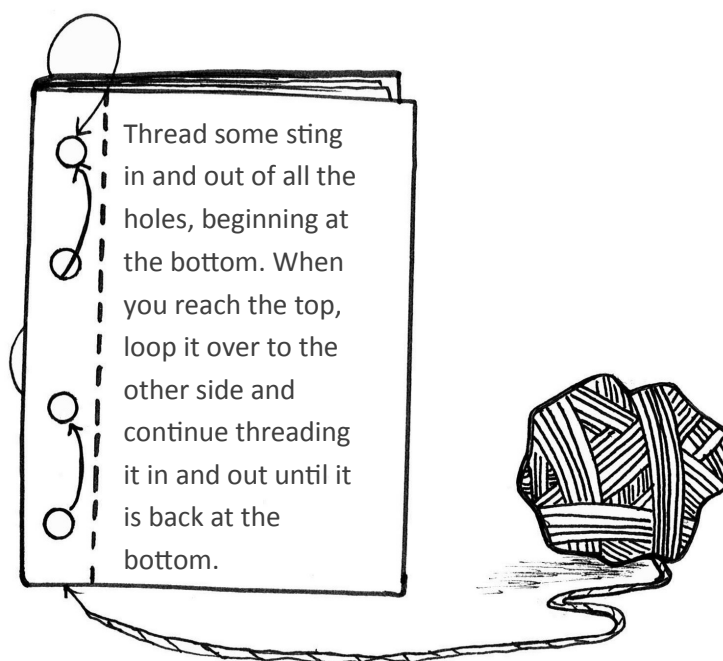
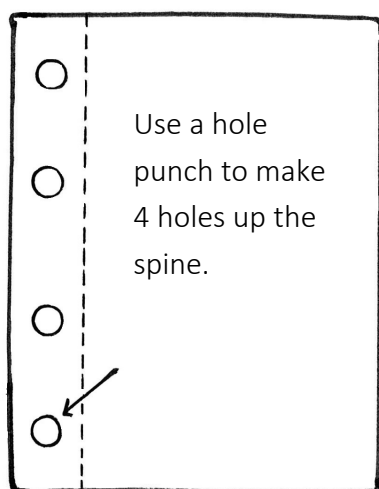
- Bring all of the pages together to create your class guidebook and fold the A4 cover around the body of the book. →



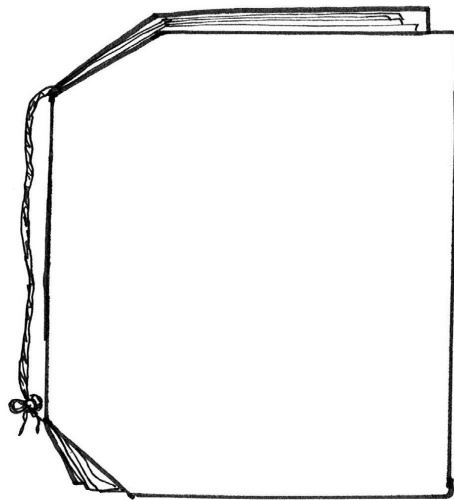
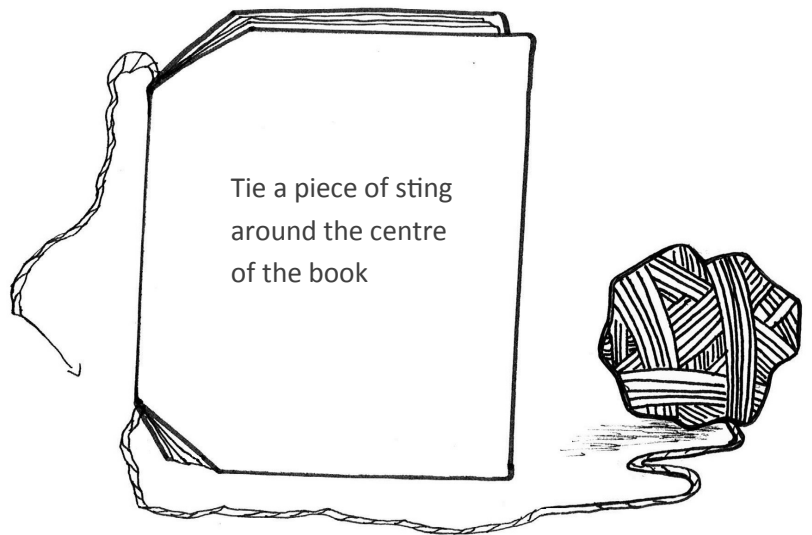
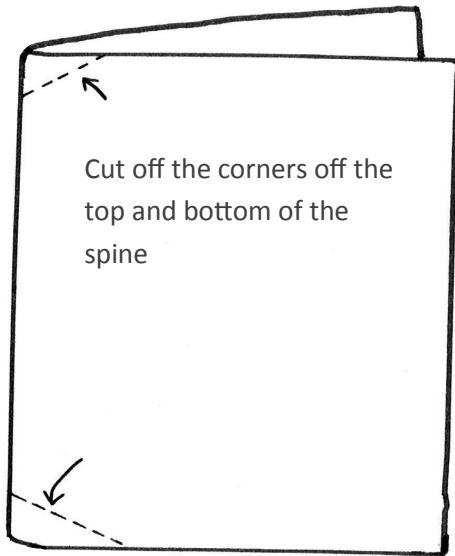
## Binding the book

Here are three simple ways to bind your class guide book -

1.

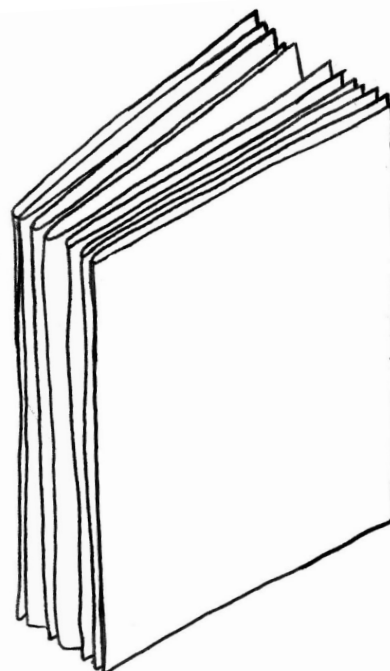
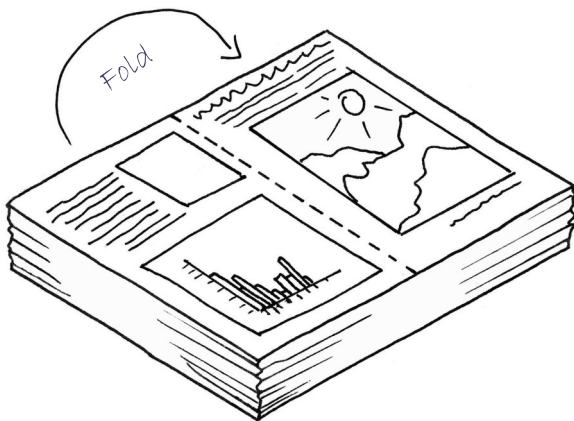


2.



3.

Fold each two page spread in half, blank side on the out side.



Arrange the pages in order from first to last.



