The story

Roberta, Peter and Phyllis live happily with their parents until one day when two men come and take their father away. Their mother looks worried and tells them their father will be away for a long time. They then move to the country to live.

Mother and the children get used to their new life. Their new house is near a railway line and so the children explore the area and the railway station. Unfortunately, the family can’t afford to buy coal for their fire now, so Peter takes some coal from the railway station. He is caught by the station master, who decides not to do anything about it.

The children become fascinated with the railway. One day an old man goes past on a train and waves to them. This becomes a regular event. To earn money, their mother writes books for children, but one day she becomes ill. The children write a letter to the old man and ask him for food to help their sick mother. Mother writes and thanks the old gentleman.

The children have lots of adventures. Roberta and Peter have a ride on a train engine. On another occasion there is a landslide onto the railway track and the children manage to stop the oncoming train before there is an accident. Another time, the children watch a running race and help one of the boys, who has slipped and broken his leg. Jim, the boy, stays with Roberta’s family while his leg gets better. Jim’s grandfather comes to see the boy – and turns out to be the old gentleman!

By chance, Roberta sees a newspaper article about her father which says he has been sent to jail for five years for being a spy. Mother tells her the full story and says her father is innocent. Roberta writes to the old gentleman and asks for his help.

One day Roberta feels restless and is sure something exciting is going to happen. She goes to the station. To her amazement, when a train comes in her father gets off it. Her father tells her that the old gentleman persuaded the police to free him from jail. Roberta and her father return home – and the family is happily reunited again!

Introducing the book

The cover

- Hold up the cover. Read the book’s title to and with the class.
- Talk about the picture. Ask the class where they think the story takes place. Elicit from the class anything they know about steam engines.
- Ask What do you think the story is going to be about? (As the title suggests, the book is about children who live near a railway.)
Ask the children to turn to the title page. Explain that this story is a classic story (one that is very good and has been popular for a long time) and that it has been adapted (made simpler). Ask Who is the author? Who adapted the story?

Ask if any of the children has ever been on a railway journey. If they have, encourage them to recount their experiences to the class.

Hold up your own book and point to the picture. Ask What can you see in the picture? Is it a modern train? Why is there smoke coming from the engine? (It is a steam engine.) Do you know what makes a steam engine work? (Coal is used to make a fire inside an ‘oven’ in the engine. This heats water that is stored inside the ‘body’ of the engine. The resulting steam provides power to turn the wheels. The rest of the steam can then be seen coming out of the ‘chimney’.) Point out that the train runs on metal railway lines. Ask What are the three children doing? How many girls are there? What are their clothes like? When do you think the story takes place?

Ask the children to turn to the contents page. Explain that the Contents list tells us what is in the book. Explain that the story is divided into chapters.

Ask How many chapters are there? Read the chapter titles to and with the class. Briefly explain any unfamiliar words (most will be covered in the chapter notes). Explain that Peter and Jim are boys who appear in the story.

Point out that at the end of the book there is a poem (on page 90), some facts about trains (beginning on page 92) and some information about the author (on page 96).

Ask questions about each chapter to stimulate the children’s interest, for example:

- Chapter 1: Do you know what a chimney is?
- Chapter 5: Why do you think someone wants to stop a train?
- In which chapter is the word ‘secret’ used?
- In which chapter is there a surprise?

Tell the children to do the related activity on page 1 of their Workbook.

You can play the story on the audio cassette/CD at any time you choose.
Chapter 1
Three Chimneys
Pages 5 to 13

Active vocabulary

country the ‘ou’ sounds like a short ‘u’ in this word

disappear the prefix ‘dis’ gives the word appear the opposite meaning

ingine the ‘g’ is a soft ‘g’ and sounds like ‘j’

fetch other words containing ‘tch’ are: catch, ketchup, kitchen

frown rhymes with crown and brown

gloomy the noun gloom is changed into an adjective by adding the suffix ‘y’

lonely the ‘y’ is pronounced ‘ee’, as in country, gloomy and ordinary

railway this is a compound word: rail + way = railway

shivering contains the ‘hidden’ word ring at the end

Passive vocabulary

bare cellar cheerful
clattered clumsy coal

government in a muddle pantry
platform pudding raisin

rustling sheet shovel

stumble
Before reading

- Pre-teach the active vocabulary (see the Teacher’s Notes Introduction page 13 and the Glossary). Use the notes in the table to discuss any interesting features of the words.
- Ask children to do the activities on page 2 of their Workbook to practise the new vocabulary.
- Read the title of Chapter 1.
- Tell the children to look at the picture on page 5. Ask Where is the picture set? What clues are there? Who do you think the woman is? What is she wearing? What is she doing? Which child do you think is the oldest? Which is the youngest? What is the boy wearing? What are the girls wearing? What do you think they are doing?
- Tell the children to look at the picture on page 8. Ask Who is leaving the room? Why do you think she is crying? Are all the children you saw before in the picture? Who is missing? Where is the boy lying? Why do you think this is? Does he look ill? Point out that from what we have seen so far, the children seem to live quite comfortably in a pleasant house.
- Tell the children to look at the picture on page 11. Ask What room is this? (a kitchen) What clues are there? Do you think the family is still in the same house? Is the house a modern house? (Point out the kettle hanging in the fireplace and the candle.) What are the children and their mother wearing? Do you think they are about to go out or have they just come in? What do you think their mother is saying to them? Why do you think they are standing in a line, listening carefully?
- Tell the children to look at the picture on page 13. Ask What time of day do you think it is? How can you tell it is a cold day? What are the children and their mother doing? Why do you think they are sitting on the floor, not at a table, to eat?
- Optional suggestion: you may wish to give the children an appropriate amount of time, for example five minutes, to look quickly through the chapter to find (and perhaps underline) the active vocabulary they have been introduced to.

During reading

- Read the chapter expressively to the class (or play the audio cassette/CD). Do not stop to explain anything or to ask questions. Ensure the children are following in their books.
- Choose whichever of the following options is most appropriate for your class:
  - Read the chapter again and encourage the class to read it with you.
  - Read the chapter again, a paragraph at a time, and ask the class (or individuals) to read each paragraph aloud after you.
  - Do not read again yourself. Ask groups or individuals to read the chapter aloud, a paragraph at a time.
- Read (or play) the chapter again, a paragraph at a time. Explain the meaning and pronunciation of the words listed as passive vocabulary, and any other unfamiliar words.
- Discuss how the pictures can help the reader guess the meaning of the text.
The Railway Children

Stage 1 comprehension (literal)
Ask these questions orally, or set them as a written activity. You can also ask the children to do the activity on page 3 of their Workbook.

1. What are the names of the three children?
2. Where did they live?
3. Where did Father work?
4. How did Mother spend her days?
5. Who looked after them all?
6. How old was Peter?
7. What present did he get for his birthday?
8. When did he break it?
9. Who was the youngest child?
10. Who came to see Father?
11. When Mother came in her face was ____ and she was ____.
12. Father went out with the men. Where did Mother say he had gone?
13. The next day Mother was in London until ____ o’clock.
14. What bad news did Mother give the children?
15. Was Mother at home for the next few weeks?
16. a) Who came to stay? b) What was she like?
17. Where did Mother say they were going to live?
18. What was the name of the house they were moving to?
19. Where did Peter sleep?
20. Was it a long or a short journey to their new house?
21. a) Was it light or dark when they arrived at the station? b) Was it hot or cold?
22. Why did they walk to their new house?
23. Who fell into a muddy puddle?
24. What three things did Mother ask Mrs Viney to do to their new house?
25. How did their luggage get to the house from the station?
26. Why wasn’t Mrs Viney at the house?
27. How did they get into the house?
28. How did they light the room?
29. Describe the kitchen.
30. What made a rustling noise?
31. Did the children look happy or gloomy?
32. Describe the dining room.
33. Did they find any dinner in the kitchen or dining room?
34. What did they find in one of the big boxes?
35. What did they use to light a fire?
36. What did they eat for their picnic?
37. What did they do when they finished their picnic?

Ask the children to find any examples of exclamation and question marks in the text. Read the sentences in which they appear and talk about when we use them. Point out that the intonation used for questions and exclamations is different.

Ask the children to find and read aloud examples of adjectives in the text and ask them which nouns they describe, for example They lived in a big red brick house, where big red brick describes the house.

There are many words containing double consonants. Ask the children to find and read aloud some of these words.

Ask the children to find and read some words from the text. Ask them to tap out the syllables in each word as they read it, for example or-din-ar-y has four syllables, rail-way has two syllables.
Finally, ask individuals to re-read short sections of the text aloud. Encourage them to read expressively and with appropriate intonation. (You might like to ask children to play the role of particular characters and read their parts.)

After reading

Stage 2 comprehension (extension)
Ask these questions orally, or set them as a written activity for the more able. Answers will vary. Encourage the children to give reasons for their suggestions, and accept any answer they can justify.

1. How can you tell the family was quite rich?
2. How do you think Peter broke his train engine?
3. Why do you think Phyllis said she would probably break something if she was an engine driver?
4. Why do you think the men’s voices were loud when they talked?
5. How can you tell Mother was upset when she came back in the room?
6. Why do you think Father didn’t say goodbye to the children when he left?
7. Why was the next day unusual?
8. Why do you think Aunt Emma came to stay for a few weeks?
9. How do you know Mother did not want to leave their house in London and move to the country?
10. Why do you think Peter said, ‘I wish we could move house every day’?
11. Why do you think the children fell asleep on the train journey?
12. Why do you think they felt ‘cold and lonely’ as they stood on the platform?
13. How do you think they felt as they walked along the road towards Three Chimneys?
14. How do you know Three Chimneys was in or near a village?
15. How do you think they felt when they first lit a candle and looked around the kitchen?
16. Why do you think Mother said, ‘What fun! It’s quite an adventure’ to the children?
17. a) Did Mrs Viney do what Mother asked her to do? b) What do you think of Mrs Viney?
18. What did Mother really think of the house? (see page 12)
19. How do you think they opened the big box?
20. What do you think made the room look ‘much more cheerful’?
21. Why do you think they laughed as they ate their picnic?

Stage 2 comprehension extra
Plot. Help the children to identify some of the key points of the plot so far.

1. Discuss how the chapter opens with the family living comfortably and happily in a large house in London. Ask What can we learn about Father’s job in the chapter?
2. Next, there’s the visit of the two men, and some sort of argument with Father. He disappears with them without even saying goodbye. Ask Why do you think this is? Why do you think Mother is so upset?
3. Then there is a period of a few weeks when Mother is away a lot and Aunt Emma comes to stay. Ask What do you think Mother is doing during this time?
4. Finally, the family moves to another house in the country. Ask Why do you think this is? Is Three Chimneys as nice as their home in London? Why isn’t Father with them?
The children’s father obviously had an important job to do with the government. Discuss what this could have been.

Ask Have any of you ever moved house? Encourage them to share their experiences. Ask Were you excited to move? Did you like your new house at first? What did you find difficult about the move?

On page 6 Peter asks his father if girls can help to mend engines. This raises the possibility of discussing the differences between boys and girls and what they can and can’t do.

The children were taken away from their home. Write a number of random words from the chapter on the board, omitting the vowels but leaving spaces for them, for example cndl _ (candle). Tell the children that they have been taken away. Ask the children to supply the missing vowels.

The children heard a rustling sound. Play a ‘sound’ game involving rhyming. Write these words from the chapter on the board: cook, life, house, good, broke, frowned, boys, dirty, door, wall, heard, cry. Brainstorm as a class and write on the board as many words that rhyme with each word as possible (for example life: knife/wife). Draw attention to those rhyming words that contain the same letter patterns (for example door/floor) and those that don’t (for example door/snore).

There are several examples of compound words in the chapter: railway, homework, everything, someone, upstairs, goodnight, countryside, candlelight. Write them on the board and discuss how each word can be broken into two smaller words, for example rail + way = railway.

If appropriate, try some Extension Activities (see the Teacher’s Notes Introduction page 19).

Ask What do you think will happen next in the story?