Read and listen.

Looking for a better life

1. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, millions of people emigrated to the USA. These people wanted to escape from poverty, unemployment and political and religious persecution.

Most immigrants between 1880 and 1930 were from Italy (4,600,000 people – that’s approximately the combined population of Milan and Rome today!), then came Austro-Hungary, Russia, Germany and the UK.

2. The journey to the USA was a nightmare. The conditions on ships taking immigrants there were usually terrible. Only rich people had enough money to get a cabin. If you were poor you had to sleep and eat at the bottom of the boat or on deck, where everybody got very wet and cold.

The trip took two weeks if there weren’t too many bad storms at sea. A lot of people got ill and were in very bad condition when they landed in the USA.

3. When they arrived in New York at Ellis Island, the immigrants got a ferry to the main immigration building. The immigrants didn’t know it, but going up the stairs was their first test. Doctors stood at the top and watched them. If they suspected a medical problem, they made a mark on the person’s clothes.
They then did medical examinations on all the immigrants, mainly to find people with contagious diseases. If you didn’t pass the medical, the company which owned the ship that brought you had to pay to send you back.

The Bureau of Immigration also inspected the immigrants’ legal documents and questioned them. The entire process took up to five hours, but sometimes there were problems and some families stayed for days on Ellis Island. Some people were very unlucky and had to stay there for weeks or even months.

4 New immigrants soon learned that life in the USA was going to be incredibly hard. They often had no money to travel any further, so they stayed in the port where they arrived.

It was often their first time in a big city and many of them didn’t speak the language, so it was difficult to find work. They lived in awful conditions and begged for money on the streets. They encountered a lot of prejudice and many people saw them as a threat.

5 Nowadays Ellis Island is a museum in memory of those immigrants. It’s located in New York harbour near the Statue of Liberty, and it’s visited by five million people a year. Examples of possessions the immigrants brought with them are displayed on the second floor, and there are a lot of their suitcases.
All the immigrants’ details are stored on a computer and searches are done by people looking for their ancestors. There’s also the famous ‘Wall of Honor’ outside, where the names of immigrants who arrived at Ellis Island are listed.