

Medieval Lives Mattered: Helping Y7 look beyond the shadow of the Renaissance

‘... an initiative which changed the public face of many towns was the provision of clocks in church towers or purpose built ‘clockhouses’. In some ways these can be seen as civic ornaments, showing that the town appreciated technical novelties, and often they had no more practical purpose than ensuring that religious services took place at the right time. Eventually they were adopted for measuring the working day, and a journeyman capper at Coventry in 1496 was enjoined ‘to come to his work at 6 of the clock in the morning, and to leave at 6 at night’. Working hours had previously been defined with reference to light and dark, which left room for debate, but now precision could enter into a central aspect of work discipline.’

Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain 850-1520* (2002), p.318

I must admit that I was taken aback when I read the passage above. If the date had been 1796 I wouldn't have been surprised – but 1496? This reaction is a single small example of how we all carry round assumptions about the kinds of things that were happening in individual historical periods. I was comfortable with the general idea of clocks in the Middle Ages but not clocks used to regulate working hours – that's just so Industrial Revolution! I can also imagine some people thinking ‘Ah yes, 1496, that's the Renaissance for you, lots of new ideas – this couldn't have happened in the Middle Ages.’ To which I'd like to reply with something really impolite ... but won't.

The shadow of the Renaissance

The presence in our minds of the Renaissance is one reason why people assume the Middle Ages to have been a time of continuity and even stagnation. This isn't an anti-Renaissance diatribe (honest!) but it is a plea to read history forwards, not backwards and so not let the idea of the Renaissance affect how we and school students see the Middle Ages. There's a jumbled logic loop at work here though a flawed one. It includes the assumption that:

1. The Middle Ages was a time of continuity and even stagnation ...
2. ... but there were significant changes taking place around 1500 ...

3. ... but these changes c1500 can't be rooted in the Middle Ages because there were no new ideas then so ...

4. ... there must have been some kind of 'big bang' which sparked off these changes – and this must be the Renaissance ...

5. which must be the reason for change because the Middle Ages was a time of continuity and even stagnation

That's obviously over-simplified but ideas about the Middle Ages and the Renaissance do interlink to the detriment of one and the benefit of the other. It's also amazing how conveniently flexible the dating of the Renaissance can be. It can begin earlier in the 1300s to accommodate changes that can be defined as 'progress' or in the late 1400s or even the 1500s to omit events or behaviour that can be condemned as 'medieval'. The development of printing is a good example, the kind of practical development that's happened in every period when someone identifies a need and comes up with a solution to meet that need - but because it happened in a period often labelled 'Renaissance' it's immediately gathered up into this new age of thought and invention.

What may be even more surprising is that the Renaissance was already casting a negative shadow over the Middle Ages during the 14th and 15th centuries – centuries we tend to regard as 'medieval':

'The hostility towards the Middle Ages, indeed the contempt for it that was felt and often expressed by cultural elites during the Renaissance, beginning in the fourteenth century but increasingly during the fifteenth and above all, the sixteenth century, was further intensified in the eighteenth century by the anticlerical bias of Enlightenment thinkers.'

Jacques Le Goff, *Must We Divide History Into Periods?* Columbia UP, translation 2015, page 59

Beyond the shadow of the Renaissance

Sadly, that contempt for the Middle Ages continues in public portrayals and perceptions of the period, despite the writings of medievalists who start with a very different assumption, that the people of the Middle Ages were as intelligent as ourselves, capable of solving complex problems, capable of innovation, capable of creating mutually supportive communities. Human intelligence, creativity and the capacity to ask questions didn't start with the Renaissance (whenever it was).

By way of illustration here is a handful of exemplars showing that ‘ordinary’ people were not the downtrodden, helpless, ignorant creatures often portrayed:

- the majority of peasants were free, even before 1350, and Kent and East Anglia (the core areas of the Revolt of 1381) contained a high proportion of free tenants. There is plenty of evidence of villeins defending their rights against lords in manor and royal courts and, gradually, extending their rights through careful negotiations with lords, again before the arrival of the Black Death. Yes, many people were villeins BUT this did not mean they were helpless before the power of their lords.
- in most years there was sufficient food for everyone, including those in towns. Lords and villagers knew how to adapt their farming practices to increase yields and estate officials (themselves villagers) monitored crop yields, kept records and set targets for yields. Yes, there were years of famine and hardship BUT people were not helpless victims.
- town planning was carefully thought through during the great surge in urban foundations before 1300. Large marketplaces were created and animal markets and pens were placed at the fringes of towns. Streets were laid out wide enough for carts to pass between stalls. By 1300 piped water supplies were being created, alongside better sewage disposal methods, and regulations were put in place to keep streets as clean as possible. Yes, living conditions in towns were poor by today’s standards BUT the problems faced by towns in the 1300s when the population was growing quickly were no greater and probably less than those found in nineteenth century towns.
- villagers were consumers – significant numbers had their clothes made by tailors (who combined their trade with holding land) and wore leather boots and shoes made in towns. Villagers also employed carpenters to build their homes even if they helped with some of the less-skilled labour. Yes, the number of items owned by villagers was small BUT they took good care to enhance the quality of their lives – and they kept their homes clean.
- during the Black Death a well-organised society stood up to the immense strains imposed by so many deaths. Neighbours visited the sick, mourned the dead, comforted the bereaved and looked after orphans. Wills were made and bequests carried out. Bodies were buried in an orderly, dignified manner even if in trenches rather than single graves. Yes, they didn’t

understand what caused the pestilence BUT they coped with great resilience in the face of a human crisis impossible to imagine.

Writing the above paragraphs, I was very aware how easy it is to turn each one into a negative condemnation of the people of the Middle Ages. I hope I've achieved the opposite!

When did changes take place?

It used to be said that the Black Death and the resulting population loss led to the most significant improvements of the Middle Ages. Research is now overturning this thesis. Professor Chris Dyer, for example, has argued that 13th century society was well-capable of adapting to, rather than being engulfed by, the rapid population change of the 1200s and thus 'looks less rigid and backward than it was once thought, and emerges as an era of commercial growth, technical adaptation, mobility, urbanization, informality, competitiveness and flexibility.'

More generally, it's important to be clear that changes were taking place throughout this period. As described [HERE](#) (on Thinking History), the period between c900 and 1300 saw very significant developments which have continued to influence life in Britain long after the Middle Ages – the unification of England, the establishment of efficient royal administration, the creation of villages rather than a pattern of individualised settlement, the founding of towns (growing from 100 to 830 by 1300), building of bridges and improving of roads, religious reform and the building of parish churches and monasteries and the founding of universities.

For the later Middle Ages, Professor Dyer lists, among other developments, the greater use of brick in building, guns and gunpowder, the printing press, paper mills and drinking glasses, beer brewing, blast furnaces and three-masted ships. Not a bad list overall for such a 'stagnant' society – and there's more, including inventions or developments that we may push aside because we don't understand them! The development of mills (powered by water and, later, wind) to grind corn was a development of great significance but I know I've underestimated it because I didn't understand the nature the technology or what a difference this made compared to hand-turning quern stones. Similarly, our modern lack of understanding of farming may mean missing the significance to improvements to ploughs.

Conclusions: Medieval Lives Mattered

This quotation comes from the conclusion to Chris Dyer's book, cited below:

'Much of the debate about 'transition' hinges on chronology. This book argues that the supposed turning-point around 1500 has been given excessive importance, as many of the features of the early modern period can be observed well before 1500 and even before 1300. The campaign of moral 'improvement' involving such notions as the deserving poor and discrimination in charity against sturdy beggars, usually associated with 'puritans' appears to have begun soon after 1350. The conception of economic 'improvement' was current among both lords and peasants before the Black Death. Some of the features of a 'consumer society' can be traced back to the fourteenth century, if not earlier ...

... The transition was for the long term, and it should not be a cause of surprise or disappointment that such a momentous historical episode began before 1300 and was complete only after 1800. We should rather be impressed by the ability of men and women to endure arduous times, gain a good living and achieve structural change.'

Christopher Dyer, *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages*, 2005, pages 244-246.

How we approach the teaching of the Middle ages depends greatly on our knowledge of the period. By 'knowledge' I don't just mean our command of factual information about events but our understanding of the nature of life at the time and of how people of this period dealt with pressures and problems and how they sought to improve the quality of their lives. If we think of these people as hapless victims of circumstance or as incapable of the same kind of intelligent thought as people in earlier and later periods than such this cast of mind will determine how we teach about the period, including the choice of content we teach.

To make this argument more personal, I think we should always have in mind that medieval lives mattered – they mattered to families and friends, children and spouses and they mattered within the communities in which people lived., exemplified by the care people took of each other in times of crisis and by the efforts made to take care of the elderly.

Medieval lives also mattered because so much of later history was built on developments in this period. There were new and significant changes in the time of the Renaissance but that doesn't

mean that the Renaissance should hide the achievements of the Middle Ages, any more than the breakthroughs of the twentieth century should hide the developments of the Industrial Revolution. Year 7 and the people of the Middle ages deserve better.

Postscript

David Crouch's book *Medieval Britain c100-1500* (CUP 2017) is particularly helpful for introducing a positive approach to the Middle Ages. I quoted several passages in *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History* and have needed great restraint not to repeat them here! See [HERE](#) on Thinking History.