Soon after the discovery of Richard III's skeleton in Leicester I was chatting to a teacher about the Princes in the Tower when he commented that the murders weren’t surprising because ‘that’s what people did in those days.’ That comment sums up many assumptions about the Middle Ages – that violence was acceptable, ideals and principles were rare, if not non-existent, and actions were motivated solely by the drive for power and wealth. The problem is that such assumptions are deeply misleading. In this case, if the disappearance of Edward V and his brother was so ordinary an event, why did many gentry rebel against Richard III in the autumn of 1483? We cannot fully understand that rebellion without appreciating that some contemporaries saw Richard’s actions as morally unacceptable. It’s also true that many individuals supported Richard. Choices were determined by a range of factors, some political, some personal, some selfish, some idealistic and moral. The fun is in the detail, not in generalisations!

The dangers of negative preconceptions
Near the start of Year 7 (and now at GCSE too) sits another example of how negative assumptions lead to inadequate explanations. How are students likely to explain why Harold and William fought for the English crown in 1066? It is likely their answers will be influenced, perhaps determined, by their assumptions about what motivated people in the eleventh century (and perhaps by learned cynicism about the motives of modern politicians being limited to power and self-enrichment). Therefore explanations are likely to focus on the desire for power and wealth. Now we cannot know with certainty what the balance of motives was and it would be wrong to discount those motives from playing a part, perhaps a dominant part, in explanations. However, as Stephen Baxter (page 33 to 37) has explained, both men may well have believed that they had a legitimate right to the English crown and, as regards William, Professor David Bates has recently written (William the Conqueror, Yale UP, 2016, page 118) ‘Whatever offer was actually made to William [by Edward the Confessor], he is likely not only to have taken it seriously, but to have seen it as irrevocable.’ Effective explanations need to move beyond issues of self-interest to show awareness that principles and ideas could affect individuals’ actions.

This example is one of many demonstrating the need to identify students’ preconceptions about the people of the Middle Ages, before beginning any teaching on the period, whether it be at Key Stage 3, GCSE or A-level. At each level, the ideas in students’ minds may well continue to dominate their thinking if they are not made explicit, discussed and, when necessary, challenged. The very practical danger is that negative assumptions lead to over-simplified examination answers and lower grades.

How do students think about the people of the Middle Ages?
What research has been undertaken into students’ perceptions of the Middle Ages shows the importance of (a) not assuming that students start with an open mind and (b) finding out what they do think. Peter Lee has written about some students believing that people in the past were not as clever as ‘us’, pointing for example to the failure to develop electricity or other technologies. A study by Paul B. Sturtevant, carried out during PhD research at the University of Leeds (2010) reached the bleak conclusion that:

… many participants felt they were living in a time that was superior to the Middle Ages. A model of inevitable and successful progress was reflected in their derision towards the period for its perceived barbarity, lack of scientific advancement, and popular adherence to outmoded religious practices. There was consistent focus on the period as bloody, disease-ridden, poverty-stricken and backward, and that it was a time marked by oppressive rulership. …

…no-one seemed to identify the Middle Ages as a past inhabited by their own ancestors. In many ways, the Middle Ages were seen as a past, but not their past.
While this was a very small-scale survey, involving only 19 individuals (undergraduates aged 18 to 26 who had not studied history beyond the age of 14) the fact that these students held such views may not be surprising when many portrayals of the Middle Ages they have met present a negative picture, reinforced at Key Stage 3 if the focus was largely on war, rebellion and the Black Death. Such views contrast greatly with this extract from Dr David Crouch’s introduction to his book *Medieval Britain c1000-1500* (Cambridge 2017):

Reading these chapters will take you back amongst the medieval people of Great Britain, and, if you’ve not met before, I think you’ll find that they were not at all what you might expect from the use of that adjective. … [they] had a high idea of the rights of the political community of their various realms and an ability to articulate it from which we still benefit. They despised and resisted political corruption; sought true justice; hoped the best for their own lives and for their children, whom they loved; met the horrors of pandemic and disease with a fortitude that humbles us, their descendants; and pursued their own prosperity with enterprise, doggedness and originality … For all our differences, medieval people were our ancestors in thought, aspirations and manners, as much as in our genes.

**Where do ideas about the Middle Ages come from?**

That such a difference in understanding exists between historians and public suggests another strand that’s important to explore in relation to students’ preconceptions – where their ideas come from. The potential range includes cartoons, films, holiday outings to ‘dungeons’, castles and re-enactments, books that stress the ‘horrible’ to attract readers, stories (some we would not see as medieval such as Cinderella whose characters students may think of as wearing medieval-style clothes), computer games, advertisements and politicians’ statements which use ‘medieval’ as a synonym for all things awful. Of course not every mental image of the period is dark and gruesome. Another, feasibly held at the same time and not seen as in conflict with the dark image, is that of King Arthur and ‘knights in shining armour’ and damsels in distress, of Robin Hood and heroism in noble causes.

It’s hard to challenge stereotypes if we don’t know where they come from and what sense students are making of them. We may regard interpretations in popular culture as misleading or simply wrong but we can’t ignore them if they have a significant impact on students’ perceptions. In a research trial I’ll return to in a moment a group of students became ‘hugely animated about places they have visited, sitting in stocks at Oxford castle and visiting Warwick castle and castles at Legoland’ which suggests the potential power of such experiences.

A colleague who became interested in these ideas after discussing them at the SHP Conference tried a brief questionnaire out on his Year 7 class at the year end using surveymonkey. Interestingly in the light of the discussion above his class ranked television programmes and the internet as having a slightly greater influence on their view of the Middle Ages than lessons in...
school. Second, asked to choose the three words that best describe the Middle Ages from a list of 19 words, the class’s top five choices were, in descending order, poverty-stricken, religious, violent, war-like and crime-ridden. In contrast, loving, caring, sophisticated and idealistic came bottom of the list.

If the overall picture thus created is of a crude rather than a sophisticated society this will enhance students’ perceptions that this was a violent, crude, simple society where people had no sense of community or idealism and were incapable of reaching intelligent, subtle and complex solutions to problems. If we don’t help students begin to think of the people of the Middle Ages in a more positive light we will be continually fighting a rearguard action at GCSE and A-level to counter such negative expectations. This raises the question ‘can you afford not to find out about students’ preconceptions and where they come from before beginning teaching?’

Looking ahead
One element of our wider Exploring and Teaching Medieval History project is undertaking a limited range of research into students’ ideas about the Middle Ages. This is led by Dr Jason Todd of the University of Oxford Department of Education. Having trialled a questionnaire in the summer of 2017, Jason is undertaking a two-stage project in the school year 2017-18, collecting responses to the questionnaire through schools who have agreed to take part and then interviewing a small sample of students to explore further their ideas on the period and where those ideas come from.

We anticipate the interviews will provide a greater depth of understanding of students’ perceptions. After the trial, Jason reported that ‘when you start to talk to students about why they think the Middle Ages is brutal for example with some you find a complex line of reasoning suggesting that a lot more is going on in the process of labelling.’ Jason has also pointed out the importance of not generalising about the impact of any one item of popular culture: ‘we shouldn’t assume that all personal meaning-making occurs in the same way even if public knowledge exists in a broader way. So two children may read Terry Deary’s books in very different ways given their different social contexts and personal meaning-making.’

It’s also within a department’s scope to carry out their own investigation into their students’ perceptions of the Middle Ages as students begin Key Stage 3 and, just as importantly, as they commence GCSE work on the period and at A-level. We have made available the questionnaire that Jason is using for others to use or adapt – it only takes 10 to 15 minutes to complete – and you can follow this up with discussions with students, individually or as a class. For the link to this material see the foot of column 2.

A menu to explore
The following menu lists some of the areas that could be worth exploring with students to help unravel their preconceptions. They are not in order of significance. Some may be more appropriate with Year 7, others with Year 10 or Year 12.

a) what dominates perceptions of the Middle Ages? Castles? War? Other ideas?
b) what impact have visits and history ‘experiences’ had, whether on holiday or in school time?
c) how big a part does Henry VIII play in their perceptions of the Middle Ages, especially about the power of the monarchy? (this brings into play the legacy of Key Stage 2)
d) do they think people in the Middle Ages could be good at problem-solving, perceptive, as intelligent as people today?
e) do they think of people as a mass without diversity of views?
f) concerned to improve their lives e.g. safeguarding health or improving houses?
g) able to and interested in travelling, having links overseas and eager to explore new ideas?
h) do they see religious belief as having depth and importance to individuals or as superstition, a sign of credulousness and lack of logic?
i) how do they think of monarchs and politics – e.g. that kings were all powerful? Was the king expected to consult others before taking decisions? What motivated kings and their nobles? Were nobles eager to depose kings and start civil wars?
j) How concerned were the commons about political events and did they expect justice should be fair and worry about violence?
k) do they see medieval people as having some things in common with themselves or more as ‘aliens’?

Resources linked to this article
Further details on the research being conducted by Jason Todd can be found in the section titled Teaching Medieval History on www.thinkinghistory.co.uk This includes a copy of the questionnaire and a linked PowerPoint.

M. Bull, Thinking Medieval, an introduction to the study of the Middle Ages (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005) contains a discussion of ‘Popular Images of the Middle Ages’ in chapter 1 and much else of value.