

## **Some reflections on why it's worth teaching medieval history at KS3**

I spent a lot of time as a young teacher in the 1970s thinking about why history is worth teaching in schools. The main reason why I was excited by the Schools Council History Project was that it provided a rationale for history's place in the curriculum, based on the twin pillars of students' needs and the nature of the discipline. However, I never spent time exploring why medieval history was worth its place in the secondary curriculum. Forty-plus years later I reckon it's time I did. I should have done this when editing *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History* for the HA but was still trying out ideas, writing articles about medieval sources, emotions etc. Back to front though it was, the ideas developed in those articles have fed into these reflections on why medieval history is worth teaching at KS3.

The first point I'll make is so important that it's worth putting in bold:

### **The reasons for studying medieval history need to be communicated to students**

We need reasons that are communicable and make sense to the students – so they understand why it's worth their while learning about medieval history at this stage of their education.

That said, what possible justifications for teaching medieval history at KS3 can be suggested? What follows is a brief discussion of five possible justifications, not in any order of importance.

#### **1. Students need to study the Middle Ages to build up their knowledge of core 'stories' across time**

By the end of KS3 students should have followed – and be able to retell – a number of key stories across time. In terms of British history these could include the stories of government, power and democracy, of standards of living, of the causes, consequences and experiences of warfare, of overseas links and of empire, of the inter-relationships of the peoples of Britain, of population and migration, of the landscape of village and towns. By teaching medieval history we enable students to learn about important, often critical, stages in these stories.

This aim of retelling key stories has long seemed to me to be an obvious one, but it's always been harder to achieve than it should be. One reason is that the planning of schemes of work seems to be built far too often around individual events, starting with the most problematical event of all in the context of stories over time – 1066. Planning needs to start from the outline stories themselves e.g. a

summary in one paragraph of the story of standards of living up to c.1500. Students need to be clear that taking these stories forward across KS3 is central – informed by enquiries on individual events, not submerged and hidden by those events. It's a mistake to try grafting the stories onto a series of events - planning needs to build from the story outlines.

**Note:** The above relates to British history and doesn't touch on the histories of other cultures and places because they are less likely to be told over a period of a thousand years or more – but this can be done once the habit of thinking about and planning outlines is developed.

For more discussion on 1066 see <http://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/Problem1066.html>

## **2. Studying medieval history can give students a strong sense of the discipline of studying history**

Every period and topic can help students develop their understanding of how history is studied so, in that sense, there's nothing special about the Middle Ages. However one central idea to get across with Y7 is that our answers to historical questions are often uncertain and hypothetical because we can't take for granted that students realise that uncertainty is integral to the discipline of history. Many people believe that history is about certainties and students will imbibe this idea and, secondly, some school subjects do seek certainties, creating an assumption that all subjects do so.

With the Middle Ages it's easier to get this idea across to Y7 because there are fewer sources (although far more than many people realise) and there are some very obvious major gaps in our knowledge which don't apply in later centuries – perhaps the most obvious being that we rarely know what individuals, even the most famous, looked like.

Building from that understanding of the centrality of uncertainty (and the importance of explaining how certain we can be about any answer) we can explore:

- The nature of the sources from the period
- The kinds of topics which historians explore and the questions they ask about the Middle Ages – a far wider range of issues than those traditionally taught at KS3
- How historians communicate their conclusions through articles and books

Way back in about 1978 I remember showing students extracts from the Pipe Rolls (Exchequer records) that I was using as the bedrock of my MA on 12<sup>th</sup> century Yorkshire. The extracts were in abbreviated Latin and it felt a real risk using them but students did get a sense of how medieval history is studied and what conclusions could be reached. I doubt that what I was doing could be classed as ‘scholarship’ but not all teaching ideas are new!

For more on teaching about medieval sources see

<http://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/downloads/ETMHSources.pdf>

### **3. Studying medieval history helps students realise that we have much in common with people whose lives appear very different from ours.**

Life in every period in the past was significantly different from life today but the medieval period and its people can seem particularly alien to students or adults whose knowledge of the period is limited. Many practical aspects of life are different (transport, communications, medicines etc), as are the very basics of life - houses, food, clothes, work. And yet, for all these considerable differences, we are studying people with whom we have much in common as human beings.

It’s the difficulty that students have in seeing medieval people as ‘people like us’ that I think is one of the most important justifications for studying the period – perhaps the most important justification. This is why the textbook-style resources I’ve been writing for Thinking History begin by focussing on what we have in common with medieval people – emotions, the behaviour of parents towards children, what mattered most to people (such things as family, love, respect, food, drink, health and a roof over our heads).

If students can be taught to appreciate that medieval people were very similar to ourselves as human beings then they have a much better chance of avoiding what I’ll call the ‘Renaissance trap’ i.e. believing that the people of the Middle Ages were less civilised and less intelligent than the people of more recent centuries. Every society since the fifteenth century has looked down upon the Middle Ages and that still continues, visible in many popular histories and representations of the period created today. Good teaching should challenge and attempt to change this belief.

There are other important reasons related to studying history effectively behind this justification, chiefly that students will better explain motivation if they see medieval people as human beings, not as a less civilised, less intelligent version of themselves. But I also think that there’s a value that

relates to students' lives beyond the classroom and will help them relate to other people today. I summed this up in *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History* in this way:

*'if students can respect people of a time as different from our own as the Middle Ages, then perhaps there is more chance of them respecting people from different cultures today rather than instinctively interpreting difference as being inferior or a threat.'*

For classroom resources exploring the issues described above see:

<http://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Medieval/MAResources.html>

And the articles here:

<http://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Medieval/MArticles.html>

#### **4. Studying medieval history at the beginning of KS3 provides an ideal opportunity to explore and challenge popular interpretations of the period**

The frequency with which the medieval world is referenced in popular culture creates opportunities to help students challenge how a period is seen and portrayed, and thus realise the importance of building interpretations on evidence, not on assumptions and prejudices. On one level, portrayals and interpretations of the Middle Ages can be explored in stories, films or computer games, as is also becoming more common at university level. In addition, though probably beyond the scope of KS3 History, there's also a very different kind of political distortion and mis-use of the Middle Ages, such as that by white supremacists in the USA and other countries.

#### **5. Medieval history as popular culture or a sign of being 'educated'**

This is the possible justification that I'm most ambivalent about. The argument runs that it's important to teach medieval history at KS3 because some events and people are part of popular culture and therefore students' confidence and self-esteem is enhanced if they recognise and understand references to 'famous events'. Similarly, having heard of Magna Carta etc can be seen as a sign of being well-educated, another cause for enhanced self-esteem. I've most often felt the pull of this argument when teaching undergraduates who clearly felt a sense of relief and satisfaction when they realised how and when an event fitted into their own wobbly and vague mental timeline.

However there are problems linked to this as a reason for teaching medieval history:

- It leads to very conservative choices of content and fails to encourage cultural and geographical variety in the curriculum. It discourages coverage of new areas of history being researched by historians.
- It may lead to coverage of events in isolation and so doesn't build overviews and connections across time – achieving this requires far more thoughtful teaching than simply covering events in order
- It makes challenging students' preconceptions about the period and its people harder as the majority of such cultural references relate to war, violence and disasters. Such references only deepen inaccurately negative perceptions of the period.
- Does one lesson on a topic at the age of 12 lead to long-lasting retention of knowledge? For most of us it doesn't. Regular revisiting of key events later in KS3 within the context of continuing themes has more chance of achieving this but many so-called items of 'historical general knowledge' may not be the most important items for inclusion in such themes.

So, lots of caveats but it's still an aim worth debating. Should a department construct a list of such individual pieces of knowledge, the better to decide whether they are worth coverage?

### **In conclusion**

There are of course, other justifications which are, perhaps, so obvious that they don't need detailing:

- Preparing students for studying medieval history at GCSE and A level. Along with Dale Banham, I discussed the practicalities of this in Exploring and Teaching Medieval History here <http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/downloads/ETMHKS3.pdf>
- Providing a context for studying topics and change in later periods but please NOT by assuming that the Middle Ages saw only continuities or, worse, stagnation!

And finally there's the pleasure and excitements of studying such a distant and intriguing period which has left so much visible evidence in our landscape and whose legacies continue to influence our lives.

I'm sure you can think of others!