

## **Teaching the Civil War at KS3 - What would we like the students to remember?**

This brief set of notes is not rooted in deep knowledge of the Civil War - I've always felt slightly guilty that I've not been more interested in this central topic in British history - but focuses on asking what we might want students aged about 12 to understand and take away about the topic. In fact my lack of engagement with the topic may help as I suspect it mirrors many reactions – I've never really felt any natural interest in all those religious groups or the political leaders bar Fairfax and Cromwell. Basically it's always been a topic I've had to do, as a student, as a young teacher (when my limited knowledge of the period meant I never moved beyond the activities set out in schemes of work and textbooks) or, latterly, in editing textbooks. So these are some thoughts of a failed teacher of the Civil War!

What I've tried to do is raise my eyes above the immediate story of why did the war start, why did Parliament win, why was Charles executed. This has to be covered in outline but how can this narrow focus on the 1640s relate to KS3 History as a course and how can it make an impact, linking more immediately to 12 year olds in a classroom? Here are some ideas, intended as a stimulus to discussion.

### **1. Was the Civil War really so important to the people of our town/county?**

The Civil War happened here – in our town, our county, significantly affecting the people who lived where we live now – but one basic problem with the Civil War in my mind is that it always seemed to be happening 'over there'. At school in Liverpool I knew about what was happening in London and at vague places called Marston Moor and Naseby but not that there was a siege of Liverpool and that the town saw a lot of destruction after its capture by the Royalists. And despite living in Yorkshire for nearly 40 years it was only the challenge of doing a session at the SHP Conference in 2010 on the Civil War that led me to discover that one day in 1643 Fairfax had led a cavalry charge down the Headrow – just where I'd walked hundreds, maybe thousands of times.

So maybe one question that's worth investigating with Y8 is 'Was the Civil War really important to the people of ...?' This emphasis on locality can be very motivating for children and this may be a very good starter, an enthusiasm-raising way into the national picture, rather than being a follow-on activity. This challenges the automatic assumption that we start the Civil War by investigating its causes – but investigating the causes of an event when you don't know anything about the event itself doesn't seem the most motivating way round. Better, perhaps, to study what happened and then ask or prompt students to ask – so why did all this begin?

So, to take an example discussed in more detail elsewhere on the site, what would asking 'Was the Civil War really important to the people of Leeds?' involve? It would include:

- the story of what happened in Leeds (and Yorkshire for context) – the town was held by Parliament, then Royalists, then Parliament with bombardments and a full-blown assault
- how these events affected the local people including quartering soldiers and food shortages
- how they might have felt as news came in of nearby events

**But** also it raises questions about what else was happening and whether other events were more important. Leeds was hit by plague during the Civil War (brought by soldiers) and 20% of the people died – far more than died as a result of passing cannonballs. And there's the unknowns that must have affected people – harvest quality, food prices, births, marriages and deaths – even the Civil War didn't happen in a vacuum.

Many towns experienced similar experiences – one calculation is that 150 towns saw some level of destruction as a result of the wars with over 50,000 people being made homeless. Overall it's likely that a higher proportion of the English population died between 1642 and 1649 than between 1914 and 1918 – quite a shocking statistic but believable when you think of the outbreaks of plague and all the fires that were set off in towns crammed with timber buildings.

So, would children be better motivated if they begin to investigate the Civil War through their town or county and then move onto the national picture? See below for the link to the exemplar activity on the Civil War in Leeds.

## **2. What should we remember about the Civil War?**

The comparison may seem inappropriate but I was very struck, listening to Paul Salmons talking about the Holocaust at the 2010 SHP Conference, by the phrase – ‘Active forgetting of slaughter and destruction.’ This raises the question of whether, by concentrating on objective analysis of causes and on the execution of the king it’s too easy to ignore and forget that slaughter and destruction and thus unwittingly cement in students’ minds the thoughts that wars happen only in other countries and only involve soldiers, that civilian casualties only began in any number with the Blitz.

So, I wonder whether one knowledge ‘take-away’ could be an awareness of what drove people to kill their fellow-countrymen when that wasn’t what anyone wanted or intended in 1642. Maybe this is an important question to ask, one that’s re-useable because it can link into and help students to understand about events around the world today.

So, would children be better motivated if a core task is to decide which of several understandings (e.g. about the causes of the war, about impact on locality, about the execution of the king, about why people killed their neighbours etc) is the most important outcome of studying the Civil War? What do they think we should remember about the Civil war? What should we commemorate?

## **3. Was the Civil War really so important in the big picture of monarchy and parliament?**

One question that determines how we approach the Civil War is whether we plan coverage based around the events in isolation or whether we plan so that the Civil War is seen as part of the long term story of the relationship of monarchy and parliament. If the former, then linking from the 1640s to the big picture can be tricky and look ‘tacked on’ – in the worst cases there’s no link to a bigger picture at all and all coverage of this theme stops in 1660 at the latest.

The second approach, planning coverage of the Civil War in the context of the overall theme, seems potentially far more useful, not least for helping students to understand why they're studying the Civil War – hence the question in the title above about the long-term importance of this event.

If you're taking this approach then clearly your coverage of the Civil War must relate to the story so far – and this may change how you cover the causes of the war in order to link in more strongly. So, instead of a separate activity asking students to explain 'what caused the Civil War?' (frankly rarely a crowd-pleaser with Y8) your aim would be to identify in what ways the causes of the Civil War were similar to and different from earlier depositions. This would mean giving students an explanation of why the Civil War broke out and asking them to identify similarities and differences with the rebellion that led to Magna Carta and with the depositions of Edward II and Richard II – this would immediately help them make links across time and see how individual this event actually was.

This approach also means students knowing what happened next in 3 ways:

- a) identifying that this was not the first deposition but the first when a deposed king wasn't replaced by another monarch (why was a republic a possibility now – and not earlier in history?).
- b) understanding why the monarchy was restored – an understanding that's much easier to achieve if you realise that the execution of the king wasn't an objective of the Parliamentary opposition – an assumption that students are all too likely to have.
- c) continue the story of monarchy and Parliament at least into the 1800s to explore when the power and influence of the monarchy did decline.

Setting the Civil War in these wider contexts does require rethinking activities and the angles and slants of teaching but they may well produce a much more effective course and greater overall understanding rather than students seeing this event in isolation from the rest of British history.

## Linked activities

The following linked activities are on the Thinking History website:

[When did they decide to execute Charles?](#)

[Civil War comes to Deerhurst](#)

[Will you have finished school before Charles is executed?](#)

[Using locality to introduce the Civil War - in Leeds](#)

## Resources

Some of the material I found useful, particularly in creating the Civil War in Leeds activity – there seem to be plenty of studies of other localities available:

### **Charles Carleton, Going to the Wars**

[http://www.amazon.co.uk/Going-Wars-Experience-British-1638-51/dp/0415103916/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1285500058&sr=1-2](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Going-Wars-Experience-British-1638-51/dp/0415103916/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1285500058&sr=1-2)

[Also see Google books for Carlton]

### **Stephen Porter, Destruction in the Civil Wars**

[http://www.amazon.co.uk/Destruction-English-Illustrated-History-Paperbacks/dp/0750915854/ref=sr\\_1\\_13?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1285500004&sr=1-13](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Destruction-English-Illustrated-History-Paperbacks/dp/0750915854/ref=sr_1_13?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1285500004&sr=1-13)

### **David Cooke, The Civil War in Yorkshire: Fairfax versus Newcastle**

[http://www.amazon.co.uk/Civil-War-Yorkshire-Newcastle-Battlefield/dp/1844150763/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1285500106&sr=1-2](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Civil-War-Yorkshire-Newcastle-Battlefield/dp/1844150763/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1285500106&sr=1-2)

### **Andrew Hopper, ‘Black Tom’: Sir Thomas Fairfax and the English Revolution**

[http://www.amazon.co.uk/Black-Tom-Fairfax-Revolution-Politics/dp/0719071097/ref=pd\\_sim\\_b\\_1](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Black-Tom-Fairfax-Revolution-Politics/dp/0719071097/ref=pd_sim_b_1)