

Were there any women in the Middle Ages, Miss?

Ian Dawson

In 1394 a determined young woman called Margery Spuret stood up to give evidence before a church court in York. She was in court to prove that five years earlier she and Thomas Hornby had been married. Thomas, however, said that he had not married Margery. Witnesses were called. Margery's relatives and others in the house where she'd been a servant swore that Thomas and Margery had indeed married five years earlier. However, Thomas, a 24-year-old saddler, had witnesses of his own from the saddlery trade who swore the marriage could not have taken place as Thomas hadn't been in York at the time. Then came Beatrix Gillyng who said that Thomas was already married – but to her! After the witnesses had all been heard, the court found in favour of Beatrix. Margery, presumably both disappointed and outraged, did not give up. She made a series of appeals to the court and only after they failed does she seem to have accepted the verdict.

Fourteen years later, in 1408, another determined woman, though of much higher status, had better fortune before the Archbishop of York's court, though the case must have set Yorkshire tongues gossiping for quite a while. Sybil Aldburgh was an heiress who, with her sister Elizabeth, had inherited their father's estates and castle at Harewood. Sybil was taking action against her husband, Sir William Ryther, who was forced to agree that in future he 'shall not do her either bodily harm or mayhem or beat or imprison her but keep her in full freedom'. Sir William also had to swear to send 'Marion of Gryndon' away and never again to have dealings with Marion 'by way of sin'. (It sounds even more salacious in the original spelling of 'synne'!) What happened after this we don't know but, perhaps happily, Sybil survived her husband by 14 years after his death around 1426 and, despite the events of their lifetimes, their effigies have been lying peacefully side by side in Harewood church for the past 600 years.

Despite the examples of Margery and Sybil and others like them, many students could be forgiven for thinking that women were rare as unicorns in the Middle Ages, semi-mythical creatures known about but never seen.

Key Stage 3 schemes of work tend to be dominated by conquests, wars, rebellions and plagues – not so much 'boys and their toys' as 'boys and their disasters'. There is therefore a danger that women are missing from Key Stage 3 (except as victims of plagues or working in the fields at harvest time) until students meet those very atypical individuals caught up in the Tudor 'crowns and executions' saga. It's possible some students regard Millicent Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst as the first capable women in British history.

It was, of course, difficult for medieval women to play roles which challenged society's expectations (as Louise Wilkinson explains on pages 56-59) but historians' research into individual lives and the positive roles that some women did play can allow them to emerge into the light of history lessons. So how can Key Stage 3 schemes of work provide more representative coverage of medieval society? Here are three different routes to doing so, some of which could be combined to build a stronger female presence across the key stage. There is, of course, a danger of these approaches being seen as 'tokenism' but it's worth noting that many historians research and write about all kinds of aspects of women's experiences in history without that research being seen as tokenism. These approaches can only be sketched in outline here but see below for information about more detailed resources.

1. An enquiry exploring the roles that women played in the Middle Ages. Start with students' existing ideas as a hypothesis to explore i.e. 'this is how we think women might have been treated and what they did; now let's find out if that was really the case.' Alternatively, students could start from the theory of women's roles and explore the realities or take a generalisation and develop a longer statement of their own, exploring the accuracy of the generalisation.

2. The 'take every opportunity' approach
One problem appears to be lack of information about individual women but the opportunities are there with even the most apparently 'male' of topics. The life

of Emma of Normandy makes an excellent starting point for the Norman Conquest because she's the embodiment of the complex links between England, Scandinavia and Normandy. Why Nichola de la Haye was leading the defence of Lincoln against an army led by Louis of France in 1217 is an intriguing opening to work on Magna Carta (starting near the end of a story is a great way into almost any story – 'Why do you think that was happening? Let's go back and unravel this.'). Margery Kempe's travels and devotions open up the field of religion and challenges the myth that people never left their home town or village. There are many other examples to be found.

3. A 'fast forward' thematic coverage of women's rights and experiences from c.1000 to today, covered in one bloc in Year 7 OR a 'fast rewind' thematic coverage of the same material in one bloc near the end of Key Stage 3. Rather than breaking up the theme into separate chronological chunks, this approach would do more to clarify patterns of continuity and change and the pace of change. This overview should also consolidate students' broad sense of chronology.

4. Why is it so difficult to find out about women in the Middle Ages? This is two, maybe three, questions in one – with the range and nature of primary sources to be investigated and possibly a look at the changing pattern of the historiography (again see Louise Wilkinson's article, particularly page 56), identifying when and why historians' views of women begin to change.

The 'Lincoln knight' representing Nichola de la Haye, one of over 30 figures created to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the Battle of Lincoln in 2017.

Photo: Pat Dawson



Nichola de la Haye (1150s–1230)

Anyone who completed the Knights' Trail in Lincoln in 2017 will remember meeting Nichola de la Haye standing guard outside Lincoln Castle. There is no more fitting place to meet Nichola as it was her role in the defence of the castle that has led Professor Carenza Lewis to describe her as 'England's Joan of Arc'.

In May 1217 England was in chaos, split between forces loyal to the young king, Henry III, and rebel barons who had fought against Henry's father, King John, and were now headed by Prince Louis of France. Louis was well on the way to making himself king of England for he controlled a third of the country and was besieging Lincoln castle, the last stronghold loyal to King Henry in the area. What made this siege so remarkable was that the defence was led by Nichola de la Haye, then aged about 60.

Nichola had become a wealthy heiress on her father's death, with estates in Lincolnshire and a claim to hold the office of castellan of Lincoln. We know nothing of her first marriage but during her second, to Gerard de Camville, she played an important role in protecting their lands during King Richard's absence on crusade. The chronicler Richard of Devizes wrote that while Gerard assisted Prince John in gaining control of Nottingham and Tickhill in 1191, 'Nichola, not thinking

Resources linked to this article

For more detailed discussion of these issues see www.teachingwomenshistory.com and the following articles in *Teaching History* – by Bridget Lockyer and Abigail Tazzyman in 165, Joanne Pearson in 147, Ruth Tudor in 107.

Resources to support the activities described above will be developed and resourced during 2018 and made available at www.thinkinghistory.co.uk including information similar to that alongside about Nichola de la Haye and on page 121 about Margery Kempe.

A classroom activity based on the court case involving Margery Spuret has been developed by Mike Tyler during the Historical Association Teacher Fellowship course on the later Middle Ages. A description of the activity and full resources are available open-access on the HA website.

about anything womanly, defended ... [Lincoln] castle manfully'.

Nichola's appointment as sheriff in Lincolnshire in 1216 owed a great deal to that service to John and to her role as castellan of Lincoln castle. When John visited Lincoln in 1216, Nichola offered him the castle keys and her resignation as castellan, saying that 'she was a woman of great age and had endured many labours and anxieties ... and was not able to endure such [burdens] any longer'. King John replied 'sweetly' according to local records, instructing her to keep the castle. Hence it was Nichola who led the defence of Lincoln castle in 1217 against Prince Louis until relieved by a royal army led by William Marshal. The resulting battle of Lincoln was a royalist victory, a major step in ending Louis's ambitions. How important was Nichola's role? Here is Professor Carenza Lewis's view:

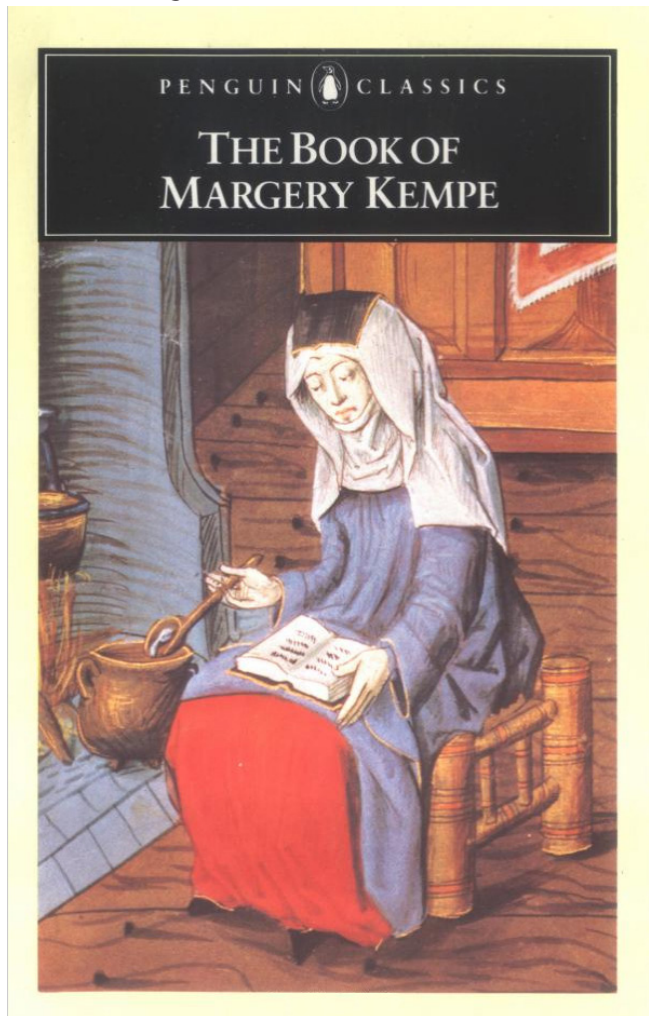
Like Joan of Arc, Nichola was a woman in a male-dominated world who helped turn the tide when her young king was about to lose his kingdom; if Nichola had lost in 2017, the Battle of Lincoln would have eclipsed Hastings in England's national story as the point when English crown passed into French hands. But unlike Joan, Nichola was a survivor, who was also the first ever woman to be appointed a county sheriff. English chroniclers admired her 'manful' campaigning, while French ones castigated her as 'cunning, bad-hearted and old' but both views acknowledged her importance – today, however, this battling Lincolnshire grandmother is one of our country's forgotten heroes.

Marjorie Kempe (c. 1373–c. 1438)

Until she reached the age of 40, there was nothing obviously remarkable about the life of Margery Kempe, nothing to suggest that nearly 600 years later she would be remembered as one of the most remarkable women of the later Middle Ages. Margery was born in the port of Lynn, daughter of John Burnham, a prosperous merchant who was mayor of and MP for Lynn. By the time she was 20, she had married a brewer, John Kempe, and was soon pregnant with their first child. The birth, however, affected Margery deeply as she suffered severe depression for eight months afterwards, only recovering when she had a vision of Jesus sitting at the end of her bed and talking comfortingly to her. Even then, Margery's life continued as before, at least on the surface. She and John had 14 children and she too went into business as a brewer. When her business failed, however, she became convinced that this was a punishment for her sins and she had to change her life.

So in 1413, at the age of 40, Margery began a very different life, first persuading John that they must live in chastity. Later that year she set off on a pilgrimage that was to last 18 months, travelling via Venice to Jerusalem where she visited Calvary and the Tomb of the Holy Sepulchre. It was there that she began to behave in a way that alarmed and worried many who met her –

Margery Kempe, the East Anglian woman who became a Penguin Classic.



she wept endlessly and uncontrollably and kept up a constant, loud roaring noise. This continued throughout her journey home, including in Rome, and throughout the rest of her life. Margery also wore simple white robes, which made her stand out among other pilgrims as an unusually devout woman.

Back in England, she came under suspicion of heresy and was questioned by several bishops, including the Archbishop of York, but her responses persuaded them that she was not a heretic. She also won the support of a number of local priests and other religious leaders who regarded her as a woman of great holiness. Margery continued to live her life as she believed God had instructed her, wearing a hair-shirt and experiencing more visions and conversations with Jesus. At the same time, she nursed her husband through illness and death in 1431 and after her son's death she set off on more travels, accompanying her German daughter-in-law back to Danzig, modern-day Gdansk, where her son had lived as a merchant.

In 1436 Margery began the task that allows us to tell her story today. She employed a local priest to write down the story of her life, working at her dictation, and so produced what is now the earliest surviving autobiography in English.