The Accumulated Happiness of a Teaching Lifetime

Ten years ago I started keeping a list of family moments I want to remember, not a diary but just a list of outings, walks, plays seen, galleries visited, things done on holiday – a year an A4 page in very small writing. Without that list I'd have forgotten many of these moments. This essay is a belated attempt to write down the moments in my professional life that I treasure.

Happiness … started with students

The core of my enjoyment for so long, whether at school, PGCE or degree teaching, so many students it was a pleasure to spend time with, get to know, try to help, all those good results and surprisingly good results though they never made up for the disappointing results. My bad moods or latent depression so often disappeared after ten minutes in the classroom. All the excitement of judging reactions to new lesson ideas, to story-telling, to fieldwork – the best moments when a student comes up with an unexpected idea or question or makes a connection to something we did last term, evidence that they've been thinking, learning, enjoying, feeling intrigued.

And then there were the unlooked-for extras – C3/IGD and their boys v girls netball and football, the week-long march round Yorkshire in English Civil War uniforms, the invitations to homes in Aswan, to Guides and Scouts presentations, to post-degree meals and parties, to weddings and, later, playing Top Trumps or on the swings with their children, the one and only performance of *Snow White and the Wars of the Roses*, the trip to Normandy AFTER finals (D-Day cemeteries, the Bayeux Tapestry and eating croissants at 3am in Caen after a visit to a nightclub), the disappointments of changing job and leaving students behind, being given a huge stuffed toy beagle called Gladstone (made by Julie Marshall's mum) as a leaving present by the sixth-form. So many names, so many faces, so many good moments.

Happiness … being part of the History Education community

I'm reminded of a rare conversation with an English tourist when I was teaching in Aswan – for the first time in months I could relax into my own language, sure that he and I could understand each other. That's rather what being part of the history teaching community is like. Most history teachers share a commitment, an emotional as well as intellectual commitment, that's not always easy to explain to non-history teachers – but go to a conference or local meeting and there's no need to explain. Everyone there also has the history teaching gene! Thinking back to my early days that

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recognition of similar attitudes was a real boost – it wasn't just me who thought like this – it was reassuring, relaxing, a stimulus to ideas. And in the long-run it bred lasting friendships through such varied experiences as being an SHP Fellow, working with teachers when editing their textbooks, supporting young teachers gearing up to run their first workshop at a conference. We may only meet once a year (or longer thanks to Covid) but we pick up the threads as if that previous meeting had been last week, not last year. It's down to mutual trust and respect, shared ideals and experiences. What a gift it's been.

Happiness … was never greater than on Saturday evening at SHP

What do you do on a Saturday evening of a conference when everyone's been flat out since Friday lunchtime on top of a week in the classroom? Well for about 20 years, occasionally at first but then every year, I told stories. Not 'are you sitting comfortably?' stories but active ones with volunteers joining in to play the historical characters in the stories – it wasn't ever explicit but I was trying to give people teaching ideas at the same time. It started with King John in the very early 90s and later the Armada, Bannockburn, the Civil War in Yorkshire, The Industrial Revolution, the Wars of the Roses (with real roses to show who was on which side and which I gave to people in the bar afterwards), an 'everybody takes part' activity comparing the significance of half a dozen events using the width of the auditorium as several giant continuum lines. Each year seemed to get more ambitious with more costumes and props – the French army carrying baguettes instead of rifles the year we did the Napoleonic Wars, Chris wearing a Brunel-style hat with corks hanging from the brim and a great Aussie accent when he played Lord Melbourne, the first Prime Minister to come from Australia (well he was in my script). That was part of the history of Protest from 1381 onwards, my second favourite Saturday evening, with Ann as Emily Davison slowly collapsing centre stage as teachers with hobby horses moved round her in slow motion, Neil posting home the ham from his sandwich as he told the story of the Jarrow March. But the last was the best, a tribute to Kate Brennan when we performed Kate's play on the history of Fountains Abbey, complete with monks' robes borrowed from the National Trust. As it was just a few months after Kate's death it was deeply sad but joyful too. Sitting at the front before we began, I glanced across at the cast, all in costume and clutching their scripts, looking excited and happy. That was one of my best moments ever.

Happiness is … teaching medieval history … and even other periods

I spent my early years teaching 19thC British political history at A level, like many people starting from a knowledge base of next to zero. I really enjoyed it, slightly to my surprise, and realised that

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one of the great things about teaching is that you do have to keep learning about new periods and topics. The history of medicine – no idea, how do you spell Hypokratyys? But that was fascinating too. That said, it was a joy to come home to teach 15thC history at degree level for so long and even more of a pleasure in recent years to be given the chance by the HA to focus on how we teach medieval history in schools – what a privilege this has been.

It's about six years since the HA asked me to run their first Teacher Fellowship programme which was on teaching about the later Middle Ages – the structure was in place but how would I plan the programme, which historians could we involve, what would I ask them to talk about? It was a real honour to be trusted with this task. And then came the chance to plan and edit *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History* which was to go to every school in the country. And the HA gave me a free hand to choose the historians and teachers to write the articles, to decide the directions and content and even supported the growth from 64 pages to over 140. These two projects for the HA have been such a pleasure, a real bringing together of so many things I've learned, even if editing so many eminent professors was just a touch nerve-wracking! One thing I've tried to do – and this grew the more I've thought about the issues – is to be revolutionary in suggesting how we approach the Middle Ages at KS3 and I hope that, even though it's been slow, the possibilities for such a revolution have become visible through resources on my website ThinkingHistory … and speaking of websites …

Happiness is … having a website with which to share ideas

I never imagined having a website but then I'm not the least technologically-minded. The origins of ThinkingHistory owe a lot to Ian Coulson. I was havering over letting my name go forward for a National Teaching Award in the university sector – I didn't think they'd let me apply as I was over-qualified with being a PGCE tutor and what would I do with £50,000 if I won anyway? Discussing this with Ian he said 'All that work on role-plays, it'll never work in a book. What about a website?' And the ideas snowballed and I applied and, despite the Head of Education at Trinity saying I'd never win an award by beginning my application with the words 'Have you ever cut the ear off a teddy bear in cold blood'? I did win and that was back in 2003. Dan Moorhouse, one of my former trainees, built the first website and later my wife Pat built a second version – I suspect she's spent far more hours working on it than I have.

Has it been worthwhile? I hope so, even if there's been plenty of times when it's felt a big responsibility, that I ought to be writing faster, that my list of unfinished ideas is still immense. And

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I do kick myself a lot for things I didn't get right. I should have added text for students to read after they've completed an activity like Je suis le roi and there's lots of places where I could have made my explanations fuller but got carried away by excitement. But I hope it's helped spread good ideas, both in terms of classroom resources and ideas in articles for both secondary and primary history. It's been brilliant hearing from teachers who've used material on the site, some in parts of the world I'd never have imagined reaching, and when teachers have sent me resources to make available to others. It's been a privilege to host resources from the likes of Ian Luff and Dale Banham and many others. And the best thing of all? Nobody edits what I write, apart from Pat of course.

Happiness … is it possible when running CPD courses?

My wife is drawing a map of all the churches and abbeys we've been to since Salisbury Cathedral in 74 when we went in just good friends and came out differently. Her map is an amazing way to recall happy memories so maybe I should try this with all the places I've run CPD courses – from Cornwall to Scotland, Cumbria to Kent, in Northern Ireland, Wales and the Isle of Man and almost everywhere in between, except Hampshire – I still feel guilty about Hampshire. The trouble is that it wasn't all happy – running courses has been a real mix of experiences. My first CPD for SHP was terrifying. It was in London, a briefing session telling potential SHP teachers what the course was about but I'd been warned by a colleague that Peter Lee and Alaric Dickinson would be there and would enjoy tearing my arguments to pieces – they weren't and Alaric was far too nice a man to have done so anyway but I was still terrified. And there were other bad and flat ones – a lot in the 80s when I talked about things I only half-believed in, like the importance of in-depth analysing of levels of understandings of concepts. Happily in the late 80s I switched tack, demonstrating teaching activities from KS2 to A level, talking about planning curriculum content, about using enquiry questions when the idea was new in the late 80s, about helping students learn more effectively – I was a different person then. Of course I never stopped being nervous before courses, especially in recent years when the age-gap between teachers and myself has been huge but overall there's been a lot of good days to remember – sharing courses with Chris and Dale and others, the first try out of *Je suis le roi*, the teacher who really did think I was drinking urine, the snow in Durham, the slow afternoon after the course convenor put a bottle of wine on each table at lunch, the freezing December day at the BM when they'd forgotten to put the heating on, a day course in Bristol within a week of being on a drip in hospital in Leeds, mid-plenary at SHP when I realised that Christine was eating the lemon meringue I'd put aside for my tea, the twenty or so on-line sessions this last year with groups of trainees on teaching about the Middle Ages, the day in

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Wrexham when just 5 teachers turned up but we still role-played the Armada, all a long way from that terrifying day in London.

Happiness … is even possible when writing textbooks

I wrote my first textbook almost by accident. In the early 80s SCHP was publishing its first series for KS3, a weird little series excitingly called History 11-13, eight 48-page books, focussing on evidence, change etc and on very detailed topics that hardly anyone taught. The teacher due to write the first book on Prehistoric Britain backed out and a replacement was needed. I wasn't doing anything as I was recuperating from an operation so why not? And I wrote it and had fun, especially digging round in the university library looking for material. Within the year I was editing the second half of the series and thus began thirty years of involvement with writing and editing textbooks.

I've always described textbook writing as a craft, an exercise in problem-solving. I know how many pages (though never enough), what I want to include and what students are likely to struggle with so how do I plan all that and what's the best balance for each topic of text, artwork, diagrams, illustrations? It's far more creative than people expect. Editing has been very satisfying, helping new writers understand the process of planning and writing to the space and there's been a pastoral side to editing, as it may take two years or more for a book to move from commission to publication and a lot could happen to a writer that required support from their editor. For much of that time I was lucky in working with Jim Belben, my editor at John Murray and then Hodder, because Jim gave me licence to experiment in books and space to do what I felt was right. I've always believed that books should challenge teachers, providing CPD in a textbook, as well as challenging students. And in the early days I enjoyed the research as we had longer lead-times on books and proper time to read journals and be up-to-date with the history, something that was lost later because government-initiated changes to specifications never allowed time for actually researching the books.

My favourite books? The first one, *Prehistoric Britain*, and *A Family in the Wars*, a KS2 book that Pat and I wrote together and *The Tudor Century*, 400 pages for A level, simply because it's so darn good in its combination of readable text, up to date historiography for its time and range of activities. I know that's immodest but it's not easy to sustain that quality for 400 pages! Another favourite is *Lost in Time*, the most fun book I ever wrote. Not many people bought it but those who did loved it – imagine, a Y7 class going back into the 14th century and meeting the Luttrells, then

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into the 17th century to meet Pepys (and Geoffrey Luttrell stowed away so he could see the 17thC) and then we all went to Candleford to meet Flora Thompson and Geoffrey, Sam and Flora went up to London. Wow, I loved writing that. And *King John* because it was brilliant and the beginning of a 20 year working relationship with Dale Banham.

I think what's best of all is knowing that these books have helped teachers. Every now and again I see bits on twitter about people using the A level Core text series which I started in the late 90s or my GCSE Medicine and Crime books which also came out in the 90s. I wonder if their longevity and usefulness has anything to do with the fact that they weren't written for a single specification and they don't have exam guidance in them?

Happiness is … a kaleidoscope of memories

If the above paragraphs have felt manic, then this is going into overdrive, all the things that didn't fit into the above headings! There was … Friday evening withs the SHP Fellows at the Yeadon Stoops Travel Lodge catching up on each other's news before Saturday's proper meeting; helping to design the Thackray Medicine Museum and showing teachers round the still empty rooms, saying 'next week there'll be a display on Jenner over there and here …'; being Henry VII holding a council meeting at the Tower of London and having my bags (full of costume) searched by 18 year old soldiers with big rifles; a day at Kirkstall Abbey with a primary school – they were 14th century monks, my students and I were visitors fleeing the Black Death; telling the story of Britain from Romans to Normans in an hour for an auditorium full of Euroclio delegates in Bristol – lots of props and taking parts, the Norwegian teachers more than living up to their Viking DNA by attacking Lindisfarne when my back was turned (as I led the session in costume there were lots of photos); introducing the first SHP Conference at Easter 1989, not knowing how it would go and whether there's be another one next year, and leading five different workshops on four different topics in the two days; unpacking the first box of *What is History?* resources in 1975 and those first Medicine books in 1976; exploring Rochester castle and Hastings battlefield and several pubs with Ian Coulson; beginning a public enquiry into the Peterloo Massacre with my A level students, only for Orator Hunt to be required for a careers interview just as he was giving evidence; the letter back in 1979 saying that my article (all 2 pages of it) had been accepted for publication in *Teaching History* (and the next I saw of it was in print, no discussion, no proofs; hearing I'd won that National Teaching Award the afternoon before Pat had a mastectomy – she was delighted, I wasn't interested; the HA Hon Fellowship and the serious embarrassment of receiving Leeds Trinity's version of an Hon degree (though the cap and gown were nice); playing the role of Henry VIII in

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the first performance of Kate Brennan's play on the history of Fountains Abbey – actually amongst the abbey buildings with Helen's year 7s; telling Abdelsebhor he spoke English like a gamoosa (water buffalo) and the whole class, including Abdelsebhor, collapsing with laughter; that first day with my new form, C3/IGD, having looked at their photos, found out what their middle school had said about them and asking them about things they'd done or were interested in.

Can I go back and start again?

Happiness is … surviving to do all that

What am I most proud of? None of the above. I'm most proud of just keeping going, doing stuff. In 1981 when I was 29 I had an operation to remove much of my colon on a bank holiday. An emergency. It lasted eleven hours. There was no guarantee and a lot of doubt I'd survive. It was five years before I was finally on the way to recovery. In the interim our son had been born, I'd written my first book and I'd had many more operations (my record was 6 in a fortnight), had gone down nearer 7 stones than 8 and had to teach from a wheelchair for a time. The 90s brought, on occasion, more ambulances to A and E and more drips. I've had an ileostomy since 1981 and have PTSD as a result of the necessary but sometimes brutal treatments I experienced during times in Intensive Care. That, for Pat and I, is the context for all the above and why I've been so fortunate to have the chance to do all those things, few of which I'd done by the age of 29. How lucky is that?

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