Teaching the Industrial Revolution:

What would we like students to remember?

This isn't based on deep love and knowledge of the Industrial Revolution. It's never been one of my enthusiasms and I've generally thought that if I had wanted to teach about steam engines I'd have been a Physics teacher. Sadly I suspect this lack of enthusiasm transmitted itself to my classes and I probably spent less time than I should in creating interesting lessons. And yet I've never been quite comfortable with this anti-Ind Rev attitude. After all, it's one of the two most transformative and significant 'events' in British history (the other one's the Neolithic Revolution – the transition from hunter-gathering to farming – and how much time does that get in the National Curriculum?)

So this brief discussion is an attempt to make up for 35 years of neglect. In truth I bounced off the surface of the Industrial Revolution, distracted by details that my unscientific mind knew it would never come to terms with. What I actually needed to do was think harder about the IR and particularly what I wanted students to take away and, hopefully, remember longer than just up to the end of break. What eventually got me thinking harder was a spot of family tree research in which I discovered that one my lines of ancestors provide the classic rural to urban phenomenon, from agricultural labourers in Cumbria in the early 19th century (and probably for generations before) to working in the iron industry in Liverpool by the 1850s. And that focus on three generations gave me an enquiry question – how different was life for my great-grandfather born c.1850 than it had been for his grandfather born in the 1780s - and why had their lives changed?

That led me to think about the IR on 3 levels:

1. What's the long-term significance of the IR?

2. What's the overall story of the IR? [i.e. how do we stop the details of all those developments obscuring the big picture]

3. What was it like to live during this immense change?

I suspect that it's [3] – the detail – that gets the most attention, largely because there's so much interesting source material, especially images, including lots of dirt and grime. But the danger of too great a focus on this detail means that students don't see either [1] or [2] with the result that they

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don't understand see the long-term significance of the IR. So, how can we tackle these three targets? Here are some ideas which may contribute to departmental discussions and planning.

Note – what do I mean by the term 'The Industrial Revolution'? In this context (a discussion of teaching at KS3) I'm using it to refer to the wide range of developments taking place between 1750 and 1900 so I'm including agricultural changes, urban expansion, developments in power, transport and leisure and the work of philanthropists and politicians to counter the worst effects of the changes. So it's really about a period of history, not a narrow focus on sources of power, factories, coal, iron and steel.

1. The long-term significance of the IR

What do we want students to understand under this heading? Here's a possible set of objectives:

- The IR overturned many centuries of history, turning Britain from predominantly rural and agricultural to predominantly urban and manufacturing/industrial. This happened very swiftly, in little more than three generations which explains many of the resulting problems.
- There was a huge population shift from the countryside to towns.
- The IR played major part in ending the centuries-old dependence on the harvest
- The developments that took place during the IR (e.g. urbanisation, power, transport, recreation) created the world we still live in. Britain was a very different place to live in before and after the IR.

Linked activities

- How much history did the Industrial Revolution overturn? [click here]
- How did the Industrial revolution change where people lived? [click here]
- Why was the harvest so important? [click here]

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2. What's the overall story of the IR?

[i.e. how do we stop the details of all those developments obscuring the big picture]

One of the dangers of focussing on the dire living and working conditions experienced by many people during the IR is that it's difficult to establish a balanced picture of the IR as an overall event. An overview provides the opportunity to strike this balance but to create an effective overview it needs a big theme otherwise it deteriorates into one darn invention after another. While 'the big story' of the IR could be debated for a long time my chosen theme is that the IR was, above all, about 'problem-solving'.

Society faced a whole series of problems between c1750 and c1900 (how do we feed a growing population? how do we create more power? how do we combat the urban problems resulting from industrialization?) but individuals and groups came up with solutions to each problem, showing enormous inventiveness and intelligence. Of course many solutions led onto other problems but they in turn were tackled and often solved. It's this chain of problem-solution-problem-solution that's behind the overview activity (link below), an activity that shows both the light and the dark of the IR, but also I hope, by celebrating discoveries and inventions, thereby showing great respect for our near-ancestors who created the framework for the society in which we still live. Maybe by being more celebratory of the IR we can make it more attractive as a classroom topic for both teachers and students?

Linked activity

- Who's got the answer to the problem? The story of the Industrial Revolution. [click here]

3. What was it like to live during this immense change?

I noted above that I became interested in the IR through family history and I think this gives us a clue about how to help KS3 students become interested in more detail on the IR –by exploring the lives of real individuals and real places, especially places students are familiar with. Locality seems really important as the starting point: How did the IR change where we live? How did it change the lives of those who lived then where we live now?

This could encompass physical change of the locality, impact on the way people lived and worked, who benefitted (the 'big house') and who didn't, migration – what attracted people away from this rural spot to go and live in the nearest town or city? This question needn't only apply to Rochdale or Bradford – it applied as much to small rural settlements which lost population and also saw their

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lives changed by the development of machinery, by transport and the other developments. But pin all this to people – how did lives change over three generations – perhaps find some real names in census returns from 1841 (they contain people born in the 1780s and earlier) and it doesn't take long to find a couple of local families whose 3 generations map over, say 1780s-1860s.

A study of the locality then leads into typicality – how typical was the experience of our locality compared with the country as a whole? So the message is – start local, start with real individuals if possible, then widen out.

Linked Activity

- Making the Industrial Revolution human through family history [click here]

Overview

Putting the above together a sequence of topics might be:

1. Introducing the people and the place – any ideas how they were affected by the IR? [finding out what's in students' minds, preconceptions – very brief.]

2. An introductory overview of the IR – an activity similar to 'Who's got the answer to the problem?' leading into –

3. A deeper exploration of the impact of the IR on a local community

4. How typical was the locality of national changes – what did and didn't affect us here?

5. Why's the IR so important in our history – the big picture of its significance (see long-term issues above).

[that isn't lessons 1-5 – I've no idea how long you have or want to take – the distribution of time varies so much.]

And while you're exploring the IR – can anyone come up with a more interesting, stimulating, enticing name for this period?

That's it – as I said at the beginning this is a discussion document intended to suggest ideas, not present 'the right way to teach the IR'. The aim was to stimulate some ideas, prompt some thinking

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about what's often a difficult topic and maybe, out of this, make the IR a more attractive and enjoyable topic for students and teachers.

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