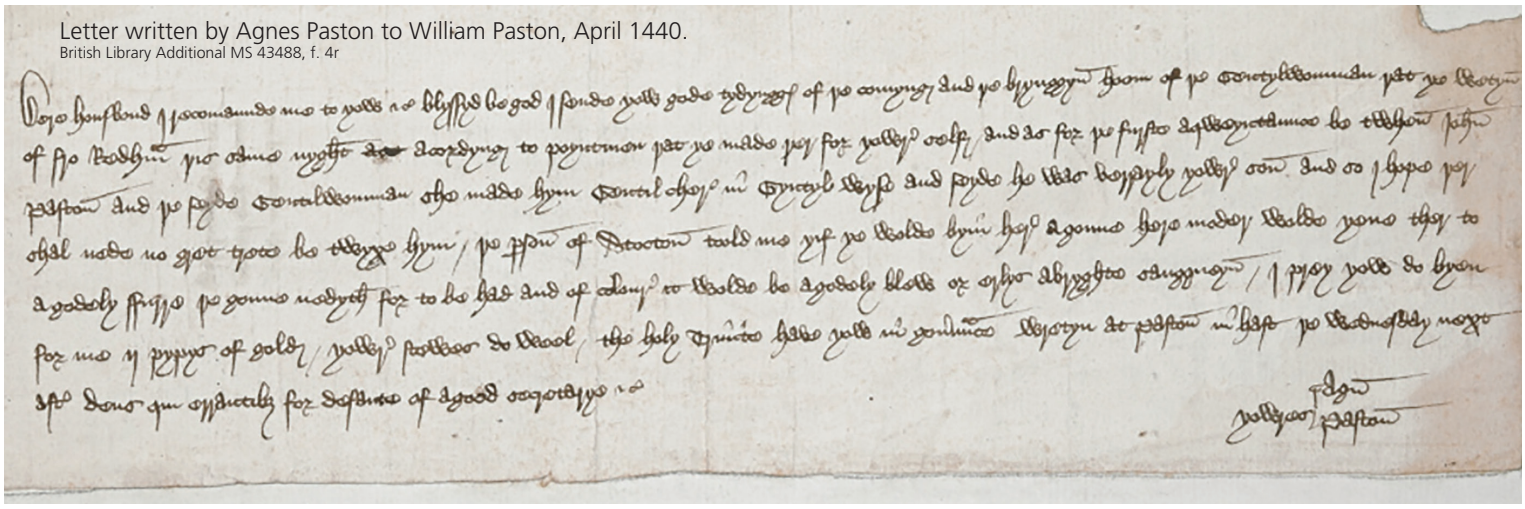
What do we want students to learn about medieval sources?

Ian Dawson



Letter written by Agnes Paston to William Paston, April 1440.
British Library Additional MS 43488, f. 4r

How would you describe the handwriting in the letter above? Neat? Scruffy? Better or worse than yours? Can you read it? Let's have a closer look – who's going to be the first to decipher a word?

Those are some of the questions you might ask about this letter, sent by Agnes Paston to her husband, William, almost certainly in 1440. Historians are divided about whether Agnes wrote the letter herself or dictated it, although the final words *'Wretyn at Paston in hast … for defaute of a good secretarye'* suggest she did write it herself. Agnes sounds eager to pass on news of the first meeting between their eldest son and the unnamed 'gentilwomman' they hope he will marry. She, Margaret Mautby, had made their son John, *'gentil chere in gyntyl wise and seyde he was verrayly yowre son.'*

This was an important moment for the Paston family – John and Margaret did marry – but what has it to do with students studying the Middle Ages in school?

What such documents and other kinds of evidence can do is help students develop specific knowledge about the nature and use of medieval sources. Such work may be easier to consider with the disappearance of the National Curriculum Attainment Target. One of the weaknesses of the Attainment Target levels was that they had to be applied to work on all periods of history and so there were no period-specific references. This genericism may have discouraged departments from thinking about what they want students to learn about sources from individual periods of history. Students do a deal of work analysing sources but has the balance between source analysis and gaining knowledge of the sources themselves become too skewed in favour of the former?

This article therefore discusses what knowledge of medieval sources could be introduced. What follows focuses on Key Stage 3 but links to work at GCSE and A-level. I'll begin with a set of objectives for work at Key Stage 3, then discuss each item in more detail.

Possible objectives for work on medieval sources at Key Stage 3

By the end of Key Stage 3 students should:

- be able to identify some major types of sources for medieval history and what kinds of sources are not available for this period
- know that historians need skills such as knowledge of languages and the ability to read medieval writing
- appreciate that medieval sources are often detailed and complex, providing us with a great deal of information. Nevertheless there is a great deal they do not tell us which means we are often unable to answer questions with certainty.



The effigies of Edward and Elizabeth Redmayn in Harewood, West Yorkshire, dating from c.1510 – effigies reveal a great deal about the skills and interests of people of this period.

These objectives clearly link to developing students' understanding of how historians work, what 'doing history' involves for historians and for themselves. Having an understanding of the variety of sources for a period also helps build a sense of period and links to understanding what we can find out about and what gaps there may be in our knowledge. For example, the absence of photographs and also painted portraits for much of the Middle Ages means we do not know what even the most eminent political figures looked like. By the fifteenth century, however, we have the first collections of personal letters and begin to hear women's voices in the words of individuals such as Christine de Pisan and Marjorie Kempe and in wills and in court records.

What kinds of sources tell us about the Middle Ages – and how do they differ from later periods?

The first step is to find out what kinds of sources students THINK survive to tell us about the Middle Ages. Diagnosing misunderstandings provides an essential base, whether at Key Stage 3, GCSE or A-level. This diagnostic stage need not take long but you could:

a) ask students to look at a list of sources and pick out those which can be used to find out about the Middle Ages and identify those which do not exist e.g. photographs taken at the time.

b) provide open questions e.g. what kinds of sources tell us about the people and events of the Middle Ages? Who created these sources? What languages do you think documents were written in? What kinds of objects might be found by archaeologists? How well informed or detailed or accurate or complete do you think medieval sources are?

Or use approach (a) first to see what answers you get, then move on to approach (b).

The second step, using what's been learned from the diagnosis, is to devote a lesson or two to teaching students about the kinds of sources that we use to study the Middle Ages – creating a framework which can be referred to when working on individual sources such as the Bayeux Tapestry, accounts by chroniclers or the evidence of castles or other buildings. One method is to use an activity which asks students to decide which categories of sources (chronicles, government records, letters, archaeology, will etc) a series of individual items belong to. This can be extended to link in the strengths and weakness of the sources and which groups of people they provide most information about. Such work will be enhanced if students build up diagrams showing changes in sources over time and also create a display showing 'sources across time'.

A further point that could be included is the considerable increase in the quantity of evidence that survives for the period after around 1200. As Marc Morris explains in his article '1066: The Limits of our Knowledge' in *The Historian,* Spring 2013:

> By the thirteenth century royal government was producing vast amounts of written material every day; the royal chancery had more than a hundred clerks producing thousands of documents … Thus the itinerary of Edward I (1272-1307) compiled and published in the 1970s, fills three large printed volumes.

But by way of sad contrast, the itinerary of William the Conqueror (1066-87) fills only three printed pages, because government archive from the eleventh century is virtually non-existent.

What skills do historians of the Middle Ages need?

'Skills' is an over-used word in history teaching but does apply to the skills of understanding languages (Latin, French, Middle English, perhaps Arabic and others) and to palaeography. I am not suggesting turning Year 7 into linguists or experts in reading Pipe Rolls but making them aware of the skills that historians need. This can be done briefly by:

a) showing students two documents, one in Latin, one in Middle English (such as Agnes Paston's Letter) and asking students what skills historians need to use them.

b) take students through a sequence of versions of a document – the original, a transcript and a version in modernised English. How does this help them understand what historians do?

The aim is to help students gain further insights into the process of studying history. The obvious objections are 'they won't be able to read it' or 'they won't be interested' but it's far more likely that students will be intrigued, at A-level as much as at Key Stage 3. To create a sense of 'puzzle' – who will be the first to identify a word?' 'Can you find these words?' 'What do you think this squiggle might mean?' (medieval documents often contain abbreviations – Agnes's letter what looks like a 'p' is actually a 'þ'. It is called a 'thorn' and pronounced 'th' as in 'think'. In addition,'ð' is an 'eth', pronounced 'th' as in 'then').

Understanding the depth and sophistication of sources

Both activities above need undertaking at the beginning of work on the Middle Ages as this underpins further work on the sources of the period. Just because you are using a Paston Letter as an example doesn't mean waiting until studying the fifteenth century! However, once those core items are covered, how do you extend understanding of medieval sources?

We use sources in the classroom in a variety of ways, for example as hooks to create curiosity or to provide a good story as the basis for further investigation. There is however a danger that sources are used too cursorily and too often about e.g. their reliability and utility, not enabling students to really understand how to work with them. If we want students to deepen their understanding of how to analyse and use them effectively then undertaking one, maybe two, detailed tasks each year, focusing closely on using sources as evidence, is more valuable than undertaking multiple low-level 'source exercises'.

One additional benefit of greater depth is helping students become more comfortable with uncertainty and the task of presenting tentative judgments through hypothetical language. This however needs the 'right kind' of question, not questions which seem to assume a definite answer can be achieved. Such enquiry questions could begin 'How certain can we be that …?' or 'Why is it hard to be certain about …? Or 'Are we more certain about … than …?'

At the same time, depth and time allow students to see the strengths of a source for answering historians' questions. Brief tasks may solely emphasise a source's limitations as evidence – gaps in the information it provides or the subjectivity of the author, for example. Identifying limitations is important but, taken too far (and especially if students think of the people of this period as unsophisticated and unintelligent), this may lead to the nature and value of sources being underestimated. Therefore, look for opportunities to emphasise that, for all that we are often left with uncertainties, many sources contain rich quantities of detail and are the result of thoughtful research or complex administrative processes as shown in the articles by Christopher Given-Wilson and Sean Cunningham.

Conclusions

These ideas are ambitious but offer ways of enhancing students' understanding of how history is studied and of the Middle Ages itself. These understandings are equally important at Key Stage 3, GCSE and A-level – in the latter it's important that students have a strong sense of how we know what we know and the strengths and limits of sources even if there are no 'source questions' in their examinations. Without understanding of the nature of the evidence it's harder to appreciate why such words as 'probably' play an important part in what they read and in their own writing.

Resources linked to this article

Resources for the activities described above will be available during the school year 2017-18 at: www.thinkinghistory.co.uk

Images of the Paston Letters can be found on the British Library website at: http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2015/04/the-paston-letters-go-live.html

The British Library Medieval Manuscripts blog provides a fascinating range of discussions and images.

The National Archives website provides detailed information on government records which can be explored through the Research Guides A-Z section. See: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk