Medieval Lives:
Helping KS3 pupils begin to see the Middle Ages and its people as historians see them

Introduction

I've spent large parts of the last few years thinking about how best to teach medieval history at KS3 – having the time to do this is a luxury probably only available to the retired! My ideal is that pupils begin to see the Middle Ages and its people as historians see them, by which I mean pupils developing:

a) a more balanced, positive and respectful understanding of the Middle Ages and its people
b) a deeper knowledge of the period, especially a stronger sense of an overview of the period

My conclusion is that achieving this aim requires a move away from schemes of work dominated by enquiries about individual events such as Magna Carta or the Great Revolt of 1381. There are three problems with the events-driven approach:

- These events largely focus on wars, rebellions and plague – this deepens the negative and erroneous preconceptions that students have of the period and its people.
- Reduced teaching time on the Middle Ages has meant that coverage of events has become more and more episodic, preventing pupils developing a clear overview of the period and identifying the significant changes that took place, which in turn encourages the belief that this was a period of stagnation.
- Events only allow us snapshots of individual people, seen briefly at one moment of a lifetime, and so students get little chance to develop their understanding of people and human nature.

Therefore, to help pupils begin to see the Middle Ages as historians see them, I think they need to study three different types of enquiries. These three types are enquiries exploring the humanity of the people, enquiries that explore 'big stories' of change and continuity across the period and the familiar enquiries based around events. This will necessarily mean studying fewer major events in

depth – nobody has time to simply add in more topics – but will lead to a much stronger understanding of the period.

How this article relates to the *Medieval Lives* classroom resources

In order to illustrate these ideas, I have begun to create a set of KS3 resources under the heading of *Medieval Lives.* Having briefly introduced the rationale behind these resources in the Introduction above the rest of the article explains that rationale in more detail so that teachers can see why the resources take the form they do. I could have gone into a lot more detail but think that it's better here to be as concise as possible. I have discussed a number of the issues in more detail in other articles on ThinkingHistory and links to those articles can be found below 9when most relevant) or at the end of this article.

Please note that I don't expect anyone to use the *Medieval Lives* resources 'off the shelf' – I assume you will adapt, edit and shorten them to meet the needs of individual classes. Treat the resources as a bank of models, ideas, sources, information, questions etc – there's far more than you'll need – but it's better for me to provide too much so you have choice than for me to pretend I can guess exactly what every teacher needs.

Section 1: The reasons for developing three different kinds of enquiries

In this section I'll go back to the beginning of my argument by discussing how pupils' misconceptions differ from how historians portray the period – and how those differences have prompted the development of the idea of using three different kinds of enquiries.

Starting Point 1: Pupils' misconceptions about the Middle Ages

Misunderstandings about the Middle Ages are widespread amongst the general public and KS3 pupils share these misconceptions whether explicitly or implicitly. The core misconceptions that are most likely to be held by pupils are that:

- Medieval people were less intelligent than ourselves
- Lives were dominated by wars and plagues
- This was a period of stagnation and continuity

There is nothing new in these ideas. Every society since the 15th century has boosted its own self-image by asserting that it is intellectually, technologically and morally superior to the Middle Ages!

I won't list all the likely misconceptions pupils may have but here are a few of the more common ideas, largely offshoots of the major issues above:

- People didn't care about dirt and didn't try to stay or be clean
- There was no desire for change or improvement and very little freedom or travel or fun
- Kings did whatever they liked and ordinary people were not interested in political events
- The Church forbade or inhibited new ideas that might challenge its control of ideas
- People were far more selfish; Violence and wars were welcomed and not seen as problems

Different kind of misconceptions – more like two huge blind spots – are that medieval history is all about powerful men (almost always behaving badly) and that the world beyond Britain or Europe didn't exist in this period.

Why is it essential to identify misconceptions explicitly? In summary:

- Misconceptions will remain unless made explicit and then challenged directly. Teaching which only implicitly challenges misconceptions will not changes those misconceptions.

- If we don't challenge misconceptions students cannot achieve a balanced understanding of the period. For example, the belief that people were not so intelligent as people in later periods means that pupils will not look for complexity, ideals or positive features of society and will assume very simple one-dimensional motivations.
- The topics covered in schemes of work should challenge misconceptions – but can only do so if you first, as a department, identify the likely misconceptions and discuss how your scheme of work can challenge them.

Starting Point 2: Historians on the Middle Ages

Historians don't present an idealised portrait of people in the Middle Ages but it is much more balanced and respectful. Here for example is part of Dr David Crouch's introduction to his book *Medieval Britain c1000-1500* (Cambridge 2017):

> 'I think you'll find that they [the medieval people of Great Britain] were not at all what you might expect … [they] had a high idea of the rights of the political community of their various realms and an ability to articulate it from which we still benefit. They despised and resisted political corruption; sought true justice; hoped the best for their own lives and for their children, whom they loved; met the horrors of pandemic and disease with a fortitude that humbles us, their descendants; and pursued their own prosperity with enterprise, doggedness and originality … For all our differences, medieval people were our ancestors in thought, aspirations and manners, as much as in our genes.'

That sense of a shared humanity linking ourselves and the people of the Middle Ages is also highlighted by Professor Miri Rubin in *The Middle Ages, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2014):

> 'It is often assumed that people of this period were vastly different from us. This is not a helpful assumption. Then, as now, individuals aimed to live the best lives possible while struggling to make ends meet, fulfilling the expectations of institutions, and trying to satisfy some of their desires …. Our sources – ranging from wills to poetry, from visual imagery to testimonies in courts of law – show individuals from across the social spectrum displaying emotions familiar to us: loyalty, jealousy, greed, hope, and passionate love.'

And here are two more brief examples of historians contradicting other misconceptions:

> ‘This was a period of great change, marked by the development of far-reaching ideals, institutions and networks.’
>
> Sethina Watson, *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History*, page 9. See the rest of pages 6-11 for other examples.

> ‘the main impression is of a civilized and organized society doing its best … in desperately difficult circumstances.’
>
> Christopher Dyer, writing about life during outbreaks of the Black Death in *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain 850-1520* (2002). Professor Dyer also writes about the ‘resilience’ of people in the face of the Black Death – resilience isn’t likely to be a quality most people associate with reactions to the pestilence.

I could include many such quotations but I hope those above indicate the gulf that exists between the way historians see the Middle Ages and its people and how the public and KS3 pupils see them.

What are the implications for teaching of the gulf between pupils’ misconceptions and historians’ views of the Middle Ages?

1. The strength of misconceptions means that it’s important to address them as explicitly as possible. To do this it’s essential (and I don’t use the word ‘essential’ lightly) to have an overall enquiry for work on the Middle Ages which explicitly relates to misconceptions. In the *Medieval Lives* chapters I’ve used ‘Are people right to be so negative about the Middle Ages?’ for the overall enquiry – in chapter 1 students are introduced to the question and they then revisit it at the end of each succeeding chapter.

2. We need to rethink the nature of enquiries to challenge the most important misconceptions directly and therefore enable pupils to see the medieval period as one of important changes and the people as being people like ourselves in many human ways.

Therefore I think we need 3 distinct types of enquiries:

1. Enquiries which help students see medieval people as fellow human beings
2. Big Story enquiries to identify patterns of change and continuity
3. Enquiries into events, actions, motives – the enquiries that often dominates schemes of work.

Section 2: The nature of the three different types of enquiries

This use of three types of enquiries is obviously a very different approach to planning a scheme of work so this section of the article provides further explanation and exemplification of these three types of enquiries – but first a short word about 'takeaways'.

The importance of 'takeaways' in planning

I use the idea of takeaways a lot in the rest of this article so it's important to clarify what I mean by 'takeaways' before going on.

Takeaways are the understandings we want students to remember – to take away from lessons so they can be used again in later lessons during KS3 or at GCSE or on other occasions. In my view, takeaways are the bedrock of planning a successful, coherent course at KS3 and should be the starting points in planning courses and individual enquiries. They are far more effective in creating a coherent course than beginning with a chronological list of topics because it means you are planning backwards from what you want students to take away from studying a period, a topic, a year of study, the whole of Key Stage 3.

Takeaways can relate to understandings of a period or events or to the process of studying history or to the value of history for understandings the world today. Here's a handful of examples relating to the medieval period:

- People were as intelligent in the Middle Ages as today
- Being of good worship – respected by other people – mattered to nearly everyone.
- There were important changes in the Middle Ages e.g. the growth of towns, rapid population changes and the development of printing and gunpowder.
- The rebels in 1381 were well-organised and knowledgeable about national politics.
- Historians are constantly learning more and this leads to changes in interpretations of life and events in the Middle Ages.

There are other examples below and in *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History* page 102. In the chapters of *Medieval Lives* the concluding tasks include asking students to identify the takeaways they think are most important at the end of each chapter.

Three types of enquiries

As I said above, I think we need three distinct types of enquiries to give students a more rounded and balanced understanding of the Middle Ages. The discussion below spells out the nature of these types of enquiries and provides a handful of examples of the kinds of takeaways you might aim for – and explains how they relate to the *Medieval Lives* resources.

1. Enquiries about people

The aim here is to give students a sense of their shared humanity with the people of the Middle Ages and challenge ideas such as the belief that medieval people were less intelligent and less moral than people today. This also creates opportunities for pupils to reflect on, for example, what matters to them, a good example of how studying history can be linked to pupils' own experiences.

Here are three enquiries that could be explored:

- Were medieval people very different from us?
  This explores emotions and feelings and experiences of childhood

- What really mattered to people in the Middle Ages?
  This includes basics such as food shelter and health, love and friendship, the importance of feeling respected and of beliefs including religion, opportunities for education and freedom of choice.

- What were medieval people really good at?
  A direct challenge to the idea that medieval people were not as intelligent as ourselves.

Here are some of the takeaways which could be built into planning of these enquiries:

- People were as intelligent in the Middle Ages as today
- People had the same kinds of emotions and feelings that we have today
- Children took ten years longer to grow to their full heights than people do today
- Medieval children helped with household and farming work from as young as 7
- Many things that mattered to people in the Middle Ages matter to us today.
- Food, housing, clothing could not be taken for granted by the poor.
- Everyone wanted their soul to reach Heaven – this was deeply important to people.

Medieval Lives resources: the enquiry question is posed at the outset of each chapter so that pupils can suggest their initial thoughts and then the conclusion to the chapter returns them to the question and also to the overall question 'Are people right to be so negative about the Middle Ages?' Pupils are also asked to reflect on the takeaways they thing are most important to them. There are also opportunities to link the experiences and feelings of medieval people to pupils' own lives.

As with the other exemplar chapters, there's a lot more in those that I've written than teachers will use – I've tried to provide alternative routes so don't be put off by the quantity. One possibility would be to combine some of the material into a single enquiry covering all three questions above.

2. Big Story enquiries

The aim here is to give students the opportunity to see that this was a period of significant changes as well as continuities, even if most of these changes did not happen on the same scale and with the same rapidity as those during the Industrial Revolution.

There are two different kinds of Big Story enquiries:

1. An overall enquiry which covers a range of themes and embeds key events – in effect an outline history of the Middle Ages in a handful of lessons

2. Enquiries which explore individual themes e.g. the population pattern, the power of the monarchy, standards of living, causes and consequences of wars.

The value of such enquiries is that:

- They identify and follow long-term changes and continuities we can't see in a sequence of studies of individual events.
- We can see periods of peace as well as conflict – studies of events often focus on conflicts
- We can see connections between events far apart in time and which events were turning points leading to important changes.
- They tell an important part of thematic stories that will continue across time later in the curriculum.
- They create space in the curriculum – you can't do everything in depth – and they provide practice for GCSE

Here are some of the takeaways which could be built into planning of these enquiries:

- There were continuities in medieval life. These included some of the most important aspects of life such as the importance of the harvest every year for people's health and welfare.
- There were important changes e.g. the growth of towns, rapid population changes, the development of printing and gunpowder.
- Many aspects of people's lives had both continuities and changes. Religion remained very important, but people did not just believe what they were told and had new ideas about how to worship God.
- Changes in the Middle Ages were very important even if they were not as great as many changes later during the Industrial Revolution.
- Nobles were very reluctant to rebel but sometimes did so when their own positions were threatened by the actions of kings. Kings were usually only deposed in the last resort.
- Some changes were the result of people finding intelligent ways to solve problems or wanting to make improvements for the sake of their families – as people have always done.
- Increases and falls in the size of the population had huge effects on people's lives.

Medieval Lives resources: I have started with the first of these Big Story approaches (the overall story), creating two versions, one a textbook-style chapter, the other a scripted drama. They could be alternative approaches or they could both be used with a class, starting with the drama and using the chapter to consolidate understandings built up in the drama. Again there's the need to adapt to individual classes.

3. Enquiries into events, actions, motives

These are the event-based enquiries – on the Norman Conquest, Magna Carta, Black Death etc – that tend to dominate schemes of work. I have mentioned other problems that result from over-concentration on this kind of enquiry but here I just want to focus on the fact that their joint focus on conflict, violence and horror risks embedding rather than challenging pupils' misconceptions about the period.

In order to avoid this problem, we need to look carefully at the details in each enquiry – do they offer students a balance of positive and negative features which allows them to relate these topics to

my overall question ‘Are people right to be so negative about the Middle Ages?’ As an example of both positive and negative, here is a set of takeaways that could be used in planning an enquiry about the Black Death:

- Over 40% of the people of Europe died and many more in Asia
- Outbreaks continued from the 1340s for over 300 years
- This was a deeply frightening human crisis and no-one understood its true causes. Many believed the pestilence was a punishment by God.
- People tried all possible methods of cure and prevention that were logical to them
- Many people copied with great bravery and resilience e.g. neighbours visited the sick, mourned the dead, comforted the bereaved and looked after orphans.
- Bodies were buried in an orderly, dignified manner even if in trenches rather than single graves.
- Public health improvements were made by local government and by individuals who left money in wills to improve supplies of fresh water, improve roads, take away sewage.

For discussions of possible takeaways from enquiries into a range of other events see ‘Choosing content to create a more balanced picture of the Middle Ages at KS3’ at:

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/ChoosingContentBalance

Medieval Lives resources: at the time of writing (June 2021) I have not attempted to create any new resources on individual events because it feels more important to concentrate on the other types of enquiries because there are fewer examples of those available.

Questions about the idea of three types of enquiries

1. If we include these enquiries about humanity and Big Stories, which events do we leave out?

> I’d prefer to turn the question round – so not ‘What would I leave out?’ but ‘What would I include if starting from a blank piece of paper?’ The two topics I would include would be the Norman Conquest and the Black Death/1381 as an interconnected enquiry. I wouldn’t begin teaching about the Middle Ages with the Conquest – more heresy! – but with the ‘humanity’ enquiry(ies) and an overall Big Story outline such as Journey to the Middle Ages.

I've chosen those two event enquiries because I think that others are better understood as part of briefer overview enquiries. Magna Carta, for example, makes more sense to me as part of the overall story of royal power and the Crusades make better sense as part of a broader outline on the causes and consequences of wars. It's hard to leave out well-taught topics but it has to be done to build a stronger course overall.

2. If we haven't got time to include all three types of enquiries which is the most important?

My choice would be to put enquiries about the humanity of people and the big story enquiries into my planning chart first and see what space is left for enquiries on individual events. Such an approach is obviously very different to many existing schemes of work but I don't think that just tweaking a course achieves the changes needed to give students a stronger understanding of the period.

3. What about the histories of other places and cultures at this time?

I confess my knowledge of the rest of the world before c1500 is minimal so I have no solutions that I can confidently put forward. However the questions I would suggest should be at the forefront of planning are:

- What can coverage of other cultures in the distant past contribute to children's education?
- How can it prepare them for work on other cultures in later periods of history?
- How does study of other cultures enable you to fulfil your aims for teaching about this period?

One approach is to do what many schools do – study another culture at a specific moment in time – aiming to enhance pupils' respect for the people studied. I think that ideally such a culture would not be European to build respect for other places in the world and a people who might otherwise be first encountered by students when Europeans arrive at that place.

I'm less convinced about attempts to compare such a distant culture with life in Britain in the medieval period as the time-consuming nature of the comparison detracts from the time that could be given to the other culture.

I hope I will have time to work on this area at some point in the future – I have an idea I'm keen to explore but not so well-developed I'm ready to explain it!

Conclusions: it's all about the people

> 'The biggest shift for me was reading *Dark Emu* … it talks about how productive, intelligent and incredible the culture was at not only surviving, but thriving. How closely they were intertwined with the land. I guess I had just thought a lot of Indigenous people were foragers and just surviving off the land, but they had this whole eco system that was so finely tuned over 60,000 years. It shifted my perspective to wow these cultures are absolute experts on this land we live in. Just huge admiration and respect for the history.'

That quotation is from an interview with the Australian fast bowler, Pat Cummins, who was talking about the impact of Black Lives Matters on the culture of Australian cricket. I was very struck by how he talked about the indigenous people of Australia – 'productive, intelligent', 'it shifted my perspective' 'wow', 'admiration and respect'.

These are exactly the reactions I'd hope KS3 pupils would have if introduced to a much more balanced and accurate coverage of the Middle Ages. Such reactions would mean that pupils had really thought about the people they were studying and begun to see them as fellow human beings – and this bring me to the most important questions of all:

Why are we teaching KS3 pupils about the Middle Ages? What are the specific contributions that studying the Middle Ages can make to pupils' education at KS3?

Every teacher needs to make his or her own choice of aims and the content they teach and how they teach it will reflect those aims. Therefore the approach I've outlined above is necessarily a product of my own aims which I've set out in more detail at:

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/WhyTeachMedieval

Those aims are plural – there are several of them that I think are important but the most important of all for me is this issue of shared humanity, of people across different periods of history and across different cultures, places, nationalities and religions today.

In *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History* I expressed one of my reasons for adopting the approach to the Middle Ages that I've described above as follows:

> *'If students can respect people of a time as different from our own as the Middle Ages, then perhaps there is more chance of them respecting people from different cultures today rather than instinctively interpreting difference as being inferior or a threat.'*

But to finish here's something simpler that comes entirely from the heart rather than the head. It's the central theme of Alan Plater's book *Oliver's Travels* and I feel applies as much to how we relate to the people of the distant past as to people of very recent times:

> 'It's all about paying homage,' said Oliver. 'Hearing what the ghosts are saying.'
>
> 'What are they saying?' said Diane.
>
> 'They're saying … please listen.'

Postscript

And if all that seems far too much to take in – the questions I've been raising should be asked about the teaching of all periods and topics at all ages – what misconceptions do students have, how do these misconceptions affect understandings, what are historians saying, do we need to adapt or change teaching to enable students to see the period or topic as historians see it and overcome their misconceptions?

Now there's a challenge!

Appendix

Some questions for departments

- Are pupils' preconceptions of the Middle Ages identified, challenged, built into teaching?
- How carefully are 'takeaways' identified and do they provide a balanced coverage of the Middle Ages?
- What level of planning is taking place? (whole KS3, period of history, topic by topic, links to GCSE?)
- Is work on the Middle Ages re-used later in KS3 and GCSE?
- Do Big Stories (overviews, themes) have a place in schemes of work and what roles do they play?
- Do pupils learn about particular issues of medieval sources – or only generic non-period source work?
- Do pupils have an understanding of why they are studying the Middle Ages?
- Is it important that pupils respect the people they study?
- Can pupils relate aspects of their work on the Middle Ages to their own lives?

Links to articles

1. *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History* can be downloaded free from the HA website:

www.history.org.uk/secondary/resource/9290/exploring-and-teaching-medieval-history-in-schools

2. *Medieval Lives* classroom resources can be found at:

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Medieval/MAResources

3. An introduction to the idea of takeaways:

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/Takeaways

4. Articles on other aspects of teaching medieval history at KS3 including more on misconceptions, aims and others:

www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/Medieval/MAArticles