Some thoughts on planning teaching about medieval monarchy at KS3

Deciding what to teach about medieval monarchy is hard – there's so much teachers want to cover and also feel they ought to cover but there's never enough time! Then there's how you help students see the big picture while still enjoying the enthusing and intriguing case-studies? This article focuses on that big picture and on how work on medieval monarchy can link into monarchy in the 1500s and 1600s.

Students' takeaways about medieval monarchy

My starting point in planning is to identify what I hope students will take away from their work – the 'headlines' they can re-use later in their KS3 course. In the HA booklet *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History* I suggested the following takeaways about medieval monarchy and government:

- Monarchs were seen as God's representatives and remained central to government, being expected to defend their people from enemies and disorder at home and from abroad.

- Monarchs were expected to consult their nobles about important decisions before taking the decisions themselves. Magna Carta and parliaments began as attempts to ensure kings did consult nobles and others.

- Nobles were very reluctant to rebel but sometimes did when their own positions were threatened by the uncontrolled actions of kings. Kings were usually only deposed in the last resort.

- Government was increasingly complex with detailed records.

- The commons were increasingly well-informed about political events and expected kings and nobles to provide defence, peace and prosperity. They became confident and well-organised enough to protest when feeling threatened by poor government.

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Those takeaways were heavily influenced by common misunderstandings (e.g. nobles being reluctant to rebel) as well as by my thoughts on the most important features of monarchy and government. They were boiled down from a longer set of ideas which I'll include here as it may help new teachers – please note that this (like the bullet points above) is written for teachers, not pupils.

- Monarchs were seen as God's representatives and were the most powerful individuals in government throughout the Middle Ages. Even if individual monarchs failed to use this power effectively the monarchy as an institution remained very powerful.

- Monarchs were expected to defend their people and lands from enemies from abroad and to defend their people at home from crime and disorder. They were also expected to support and defend the Church. Overall they were expected to govern in the interests of their people, hence the developing idea of the 'community of the realm'. Ideas about these expectations appeared in coronation charters from 1100 onwards.

- Monarchs were expected to consult their nobles about important decisions before taking the decisions themselves. Magna Carta was issued and re-issued and parliament developed as attempts to ensure kings did consult nobles and others – part of the 'contract' with the community of the realm.

- Nobles were very reluctant to rebel but sometimes did so when their own positions were threatened by the uncontrolled actions of kings. Kings were only deposed in the last resort (apart from in 1483!).

- Government became increasingly complex with a greatly enlarged administrative service producing a vast array of detailed records. Many monarchs worked hard ruling the country.

- The commons were increasingly well-informed about political events, expecting kings and nobles to provide defence, peace and prosperity. They became confident and organised, protesting when feeling threatened by poor government, most notably in 1381 and 1450 but also in many localised disputes with lords.

- Many queens played a central part in government and in support of the king, sometimes acting as regent while the king was abroad and leading government in his absence.

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None of the above includes points about individual monarchs as that's so dependent on what you teach. However the takeaways suggest the following criteria for assessing the success of individual monarchs:

- Defence of their people and lands from enemies
- Upholding law and justice to protect their people
- Consulting barons and parliaments for the good of the community of the realm
- Supporting the church
- Looking the part of a monarch to show off the country's power and wealth
- Ensuring the succession and stability of the kingdom to avoid disputes

The phrase 'community of the realm' may not be a usual one with Y7 but I think it's worth considering because again it goes to the heart of the misunderstanding that kings were a law unto themselves – and it fits in very well with the enquiry question below!!

An enquiry question and the reasons behind it

My enquiry question probably doesn't sound grand enough! I know some people prefer GCSE-style questions and others like their enquiry questions to sound like a finals paper but this one is easily understood and, for all that it sounds undemanding, opens up all kinds of opportunities for ever-deeper layers of understanding and opening up generalisations.

Could medieval monarchs really do whatever they liked?

Why choose this question?

a) It relates directly to one of the most likely misunderstandings that students may have and it's essential to identify and challenge their preconception that medieval kings could do whatever they wanted. This preconception is one major reason why students may struggle with this topic (not just this particular question) and they need to articulate their ideas about present-day monarchy and about medieval monarchy if what they cover in lessons is to have a chance of overcoming their assumptions. One linked advantage of the unintimidating wording of this question is that pupils aren't going to be put off thinking seriously about what the answer might be before they explore the

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detail. This in itself is good for identifying their preconceptions as well as being a good example of how to conduct an enquiry as this is where they can develop their initial hypothesis.

Alternatively don't commit to a specific question until you've found out students' ideas about how they'd answer this question – if they have different preconceptions then use them as the basis for your question. This I think is the ideal approach, both here and on other topics, because, over time, I've come to believe that using preconceptions as the bedrock of any teaching would probably do more to improve learning than anything else (though not committing to an enquiry may look really bizarre in a scheme of work!).

For a lengthier discussion of students' preconceptions of the Middle Ages see

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/Assumptions.html

For resources which help identify preconceptions including about kings and queens see:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalBase/Section3.html

Now onto swifter coverage of other reasons behind this enquiry question!

b) It can be tackled in a week or two or in half a term or longer depending on how much time you have for case-studies – and it's adaptable if circumstances suddenly require lopping a few lessons.

c) It requires students to understand what was expected of a medieval king and why some monarchs were successful and others were not. The question and takeaways therefore set up students to re-use their Y7 work when tackling the 16th and 17th centuries – 'do you remember when we tackled that question about whether monarchs could do whatever they liked?' etc.

d) The question focuses on the big picture which helps avoid the danger for students of getting lost in examples. You can illustrate the broad points from any case-studies you like but to answer the question you have to come back to the big picture and those take-away headlines for students.

One important point to stress for new teachers is the importance of planning from outline to depth (and across KS3 as a whole). Most of us are more comfortable with depth studies than big overviews and KS3 teaching has often focused on depth studies so they're more natural parts of

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teachers' armouries than are quick overview lessons. But trying to build outlines into an established set of depth enquiries is extremely difficult. My view is that in planning it's best to identify and plan the outlines first and their place in the scheme of work, then put the depth enquiries in around the overviews.

e) It enables work on the roles of queens to be integrated (could queens do whatever they liked?) and not become a separate topic. Some queens were lauded for their efficient and hard-working roles in government (e.g. Matilda I, Matilda II – the latter the wife of Henry I) while others were criticised for over-spending and political interference. The successes may make the effectiveness of Elizabeth I less surprising.

f) Possibly controversial – this question puts the history before assessment. The question doesn't seem linked into the kinds of phrasings used in GCSE exams but what it's really about – apart from the history – is generalisation and students will perform better in exams if they learn to understand the limitations of generalisations and how to challenge them. An effective answer avoids the generalisations that students might supply without good teaching. The weakest answer might agree that monarchs could do whatever they liked. A better answer might say that they couldn't do whatever they liked and use both individual monarchs and general expectations about the actions of monarchs to support this. The strongest answers would however say that some monarchs could and others couldn't do what they wished, depending on context and personality, thus breaking down the generalisation. Some monarchs tried to do what they wanted and failed, leading to challenges and even deposition but others succeeded in doing what they wanted – or most of it. Why the difference? This takes us into the characters of those monarchs, their ability to inspire confidence amongst their lords because their aims and aspirations (e.g. war, chivalry) were in accord, their willingness to consult and inspire or the opposite, their lack of trustworthiness. Queens married to popular kings escaped criticism for doing the things for which wives of unpopular kings were excoriated. Really good answers – and teaching – would stress the importance of context, personality and ruling according to custom – and hence pave the way for Henry VIII, Elizabeth and the Stuarts and why Henry VIII change so much yet died in his bed while Charles I went to the scaffold.

Of course it's possible to come up with a question about change and continuity in the power of the monarchy (a tempting concept because of the long period of time being covered) but this feels much clumsier, less likely to produce satisfactory learning and be less directly helpful when you come to

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apply the answers beyond 1500. I suppose I'm just wary of forcing a topic into a particular shape in order to fit an assessment objective – though you could come up with a causal question that mirrors my question above e.g.

Why were some monarchs successful and others failures?

Random teaching thoughts

a) During this enquiry Y7 students need to see the whole story of monarchy in one lesson i.e. 1066-1700 or even a later date and, to contextualise events they study, they need to see another overview on 1066-1500. Inevitably this is on my long list of things I've never got around to doing on Thinkinghistory but I did put a page in the *Making Sense of History* textbook which surveyed medieval monarchy Alfred to Charles I.

b) Linked to point (a) I used to draw a double graph – one line stayed high showing the continuing power of the monarchy as an institution, the other zig-zagged up and down showing the ability of individual monarchs to use the power of the monarchy. Seeing both lines helps students realise that both those ideas existed – and importantly why, even after a really bad king, the next one could bounce back successfully.

c) The 'Rebellion Steps' activity is a very good way of linking the deposition of Charles I to challenges to medieval monarchs and helps pupils build a sense of the big story of challenges to monarchy from 1066 to at least 1649.

See https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/IssueKS3Power.html

Random thoughts on the history!

(and they really are random – this isn't a history of medieval monarchy!)

For me the really big story is how monarchy remained central to society and government. No alternative form of government developed so that when a king was deposed the best solution was that the next king was as closely related to the previous king as possible – hence Edward III replacing Edward II caused far fewer waves than Henry IV replacing Richard II as a son was far closer than a cousin who was one of several cousins. Another critical part of the story is just how bad a king had to be to get deposed. Being a poor king wasn't enough to lead to deposition as the

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lengthy incompetence of Henry VI proves. For a challenge to emerge and ultimately deposition to take place a king had to be clearly incapable of accepting that he should rule according to custom and unwilling to accept reform and be a real threat ('tyrannical' being the contemporary term) to some or many of his nobles. Even the it took a long time for nobles to steel themselves to take action to challenge a king although precedents reduced that time by the 14th century.

If that outline fits well enough for Y7 until the early 15th century the picture in the Yorkist period has some differences. Henry VI's failure is different from that of John and others because it's the result of his complete inadequacy as a personality, not because of his vengeful pursuit of critics. The heroic efforts made by his lords from 1422 to the 1450s to keep government going despite Henry's failings – and keep him on the throne - tells us a lot about loyalty to an anointed monarch and the desire to avoid civil war and depositions. Most obviously, the Act of Accord of 1460 shows that loyalty to an anointed king. (Faced with the prospect of civil war, the nobles refused to accept Richard of York as king and so depose Henry but said that Henry should stay king but that after his death Richard of York would succeed him instead of Prince Edward, Henry's son – a desperate compromise to avoid war and disloyalty to Henry. The modern equivalent is a football club refusing to dismiss a manager who'd oversee relegation from the Premier League to Division 2 and saying they'd appoint a new manager when the old one retired.)

But once Henry was deposed in 1461 other issues came into play - the individual ambitions of the earl of Warwick, the involvement in English affairs of France and Burgundy and then the unknowable of Richard of Gloucester , all narrowly tipping the balance away from the stability Edward IV had almost created. And yet, for all that the power of the monarchy seemed greatly diminished, fifty years later Henry VIII established the Church of England.

Richard III is the exception to almost everything! His reign shows that kings were expected to rule not only by the law but also morally. The most generous interpretation of his actions is that he took the decision to depose his young nephew as a pre-emptive strike against his opponents but the violence of his actions and the belief that he had murdered both his nephews led to outrage – killing children was beyond any contemporary norm. The rebellion that followed in the autumn of 1483 can only be fully explained as being in part a moral reaction against Richard's usurpation. Henry of Richmond was the lucky beneficiary of that rebellion. (I tend to agree with the view that Henry VII inherited a strong position as king and nearly threw it away with mistakes rather than that he took over a very difficult situation and used intelligence and guile to win through.)

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I always tried to get students to see Henry VIII's reign as the pivot – in one way his control of the church strengthened monarchy even more but at the same time undermined royal power because for the first time some people put something else – religion – before loyalty to the crown. This latter idea festered away on a low or high light depending on who was on the throne until 1642 but even then the length of time it took for them to decide to execute Charles (almost the time it takes to move from the end of primary school to university) shows that reluctance to depose monarchs was still as great as under Edward II or Henry VI. The really important question for 1649 is why did they try to do without a monarch then when they had never tried before?

Books that help with the history of monarchy

A set of layers, from basics to depth:

1. W.M. Ormrod (ed.), *The Kings and Queens of England*, Tempus, 2001, 288pp

This sounds like a cheap 'Kings and Queens' books but the authors are some of the best historians you'll read - the medievalists are David Bates, Stephen Church, Mark Ormrod and A. J. Pollard. There's an essay of around 5 to 8 pages on each reign so this gives a very clear outline of the period in just over 100 pages (it also covers Saxon and post-medieval monarchs).

2. The *Penguin Monarchs* series is a step up in detail, each reign in a book of about 100 pages.

3. The *Yale English Monarchs* series provides detailed monographs, each biography weighing in at upwards of 300 pages - David Bates' book on William the Conqueror is about 600pp

Other reading

Another excellent resource is the online DNB, available through many local library membership cards. Articles are by leading historians.

John Cannon and R A Griffiths, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Monarchy*, 1988, 725pp

D. Crouch, *Medieval Britain c1000-1500*, CUP, 2017, 378pp – written for first-year undergraduates – the central chapters provide overviews of issues such as Monarchy, The Wealth of Britain etc.

New Oxford Histories – the medieval volumes by Robert Bartlett, Michael Prestwich and G L Harriss provide excellent outlines of just about everything, including monarchy.

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S.H. Rigby (ed), *A Companion to Britain the Later Middle Ages*, 2009, 664pp - contains 3 articles on the development of monarchy by R V Turner (c1100-1272), S L Waugh (1272-1377) and R Horrox (1355-c1500)

On Parliament see this outline by Professor Gwilym Dodd of Nottingham University

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/birth_of_parliament_01.shtml#three

Resources on monarchy on Thinking History

Twin overview activities using Top Trumps cards and the Rebellion Steps

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/BigStoryOfMonarchy.html

A *Teaching History* article on planning theme of power and democracy across KS3

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/downloads/ThinkingAcrossTime.pdf

Textbook material which includes text on what mattered to medieval kings and queens

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalBase/Section3.html

Resources on individual medieval topics

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityPeriod/ActPeriodMiddleAges.html

Overview activity on monarchy post1660

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/WhenDidPrimeMinisters.html

And an ambitious but potentially effective idea helping students learn the names of monarchs and dynasties.

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/UsingYourClassroomLayout.html

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