Reflections on why it's worth teaching medieval history at KS3

This article was revised in August 2020. Re-reading the original I realised I'd been over-cautious in what I'd said, putting head before heart. I've therefore revised it, changing the order of the reasons why I think it's important to teach medieval history at KS3 to reflect my own beliefs and priorities rather than adopting a neutral stance.

I spent a lot of time as a young teacher in the 1970s thinking about why history is worth teaching in schools. The main reason why I was excited by the Schools Council History Project was that it provided a rationale for history's place in the curriculum, based on the twin pillars of students' needs and the nature of the discipline. However, I never spent time exploring why medieval history was worth its place in the secondary curriculum. Forty-plus years later I reckon it's time I did. I should have done this when editing *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History* for the HA but was still trying out ideas, writing articles about medieval sources, emotions etc. Back to front though it was, the ideas developed in those articles have fed into these reflections on why medieval history is worth teaching at KS3.

The first point I'll make is so important that it's worth putting in bold:

The reasons for studying medieval history need to be communicated to students

We need reasons that can be discussed with and make sense to the students – so they understand why it's worth their while learning about medieval history at this stage of their education.

That said, what possible justifications are there for teaching medieval history at KS3? I've set out five reasons below with brief discussions of each.

I've started with the reasons (1 and 2) that matter most to me as an individual now. That's not to say reasons 3 and 4 aren't important – they are – but they appeal more to the left, logical side of my brain rather than to my heart and soul.

As for reason 5 – this is the one I'm ambivalent about but there's much here that's worth discussion in relation to planning a scheme of work so it's certainly worth its place for that reason alone.

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1. Studying medieval history can have a strong impact on students' understanding of their own world today if it helps students realise that we have much in common with people whose lives appear very different from ours.

Life in every period in the past was significantly different from life today but the medieval period and its people can seem particularly alien to students or adults whose knowledge of the period is limited. Many practical aspects of life are different (transport, communications, medicines etc), as are the very basics of life - houses, food, clothes, work. And yet, for all these considerable differences, we are studying people with whom we have much in common as human beings. This is why the textbook-style resources I've been writing for Thinking History begin by focussing on what we have in common with medieval people – emotions, the behaviour of parents towards children, what mattered most to people (such things as family, love, respect, food, drink, health and a roof over our heads).

However it's the difficulty that students have in seeing medieval people as 'people like us' that leads into what I feel to be the most important justification for teaching medieval history at KS3. In the HA publication *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History* I summed this up in this way:

'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.'

This justification for teaching medieval history therefore relates to students' lives beyond the classroom and how they relate to other people today. In the early 21st century there is a great deal of fear of people from other places and cultures, a great deal of hatred and prejudice and all these feelings damage lives in all kinds of ways. Perhaps – and it's a big perhaps – helping KS3 students realise that they have much in common with people who lived 900 or 600 years ago – despite all the surface differences – can help students think about whether they also have more in common with people today who seem on the surface very different from themselves.

Of course this aim needs explicit discussion with students and this in turn takes time and it is idealistic (and it can't be assessed!) but maybe I hope it's worth considering. This may also help prepare the way for teaching topics, such as slavery and colonisation, which have a more obvious link to society today.

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For classroom resources exploring the issues described above see:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Medieval/MAResources.html

and the articles here:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Medieval/MAArticles.html

2. Studying medieval history at the beginning of KS3 provides an ideal opportunity to explore and challenge popular interpretations of the period - and thereby to help students develop a fairer, more accurate picture of the period.

The frequency with which the medieval world is referenced in popular culture creates problems and opportunities. The major problem is that the people of the period are very frequently portrayed in a variety of media as less civilised, less sophisticated and less intelligent than the people of more recent centuries. There's nothing new about this 'Renaissance trap' - every society since the fifteenth century has looked down upon the Middle Ages but the result is an inaccurate portrayal of the Middle Ages and its people.

Good teaching should challenge and attempt to change this belief so that:

a) students develop a much more accurate perception of the period and its people, exploring for example what they were good at and their desire for peace and improvement instead of the dominating emphasis on wars and disease. In addition students will explain individuals' motives more effectively if they regard medieval people as human beings, not as a less civilised, less intelligent version of themselves.

b) students realise the importance of building interpretations on evidence, not on assumptions and prejudices. On one level, portrayals and interpretations of the Middle Ages can be explored in stories, films or computer games (which is now more common in university courses). In addition, though probably beyond the scope of KS3 History, there's also a very different kind of political distortion and mis-use of the Middle Ages, such as that by white supremacists in the USA and other countries.

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3. Students need to study the Middle Ages to build up their knowledge of core 'stories' across time

By the end of KS3 students should have followed – and be able to retell – a number of key stories across time. In terms of British history these could include the stories of government, power and democracy; of standards of living; of the causes, consequences and experiences of warfare; of overseas links and of empire; of the inter-relationships of the peoples of Britain; of population and migration; of the landscape of village and towns. By teaching medieval history we enable students to learn about important, often critical, stages in these stories.

This aim of retelling key stories has long seemed to me to be an obvious one but it's always been harder to achieve than it should be. One reason is that the planning of schemes of work seems to be built far too often around individual events, starting with the most problematical event of all in the context of stories over time – 1066. Planning needs to start from the outline stories themselves e.g. a summary in one paragraph of the story of standards of living up to c.1500. Students need to be clear that taking these stories forward across KS3 is central – informed by enquiries on individual events, not submerged and hidden by those events. It's mistake to try grafting the stories onto a series of events – it doesn't work because it doesn't create coherence.

Note: The above relates to British history and doesn't touch on the histories of other cultures and places because they are less likely to be told over a period of a thousand years or more – but this can be done once the habit of thinking about and planning outlines is developed.

For more discussion on 1066 see https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/Problem1066.html

4. Studying medieval history can give students a strong sense of the discipline of studying history

Every period and topic can help students develop their understanding of how history is studied so, in that sense, there's nothing special about the Middle Ages. However one central idea to get across with Y7 is that our answers to historical questions are often uncertain and hypothetical. We can't take for granted that students see uncertainty as integral to the discipline of history because they imbibe somehow the belief held by many people that history is about certainties, perhaps in part because some school subjects do seek certainties, creating an assumption that all subjects do so.

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With the Middle Ages it's easier to get this idea across to Y7 because there are fewer sources (though far more than most people realise) and there are some very obvious major gaps in our knowledge which don't apply in later centuries – perhaps the most obvious being that we rarely know what individuals, even the most famous, looked like.

Building from that understanding of the centrality of uncertainty (and the importance of explaining how certain and uncertain we can be about any answer) we can explore:

- The nature of the sources from the period
- The kinds of topics which historians explore and the questions they ask about the Middle Ages – a far wider range of issues than those traditionally taught at KS3
- How historians communicate their conclusions through articles and books

Way back in about 1978 I remember showing students extracts from the Pipe Rolls (Exchequer records) that I was using as the bedrock of my MA on 12th century Yorkshire. The extracts were in abbreviated Latin and it felt a real risk using them but students did get a sense of how medieval history is studied and what conclusions could be reached. I doubt that what I was doing could be classed as 'scholarship' but it indicates that not all recent teaching ideas are new!

For more on teaching about medieval sources see

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/downloads/ETMHSources.pdf

5. Medieval history as popular culture or a sign of being 'educated'

This is the possible justification that I'm most ambivalent about. The argument runs that it's important to teach medieval history at KS3 because some events and people are part of popular culture and therefore students' confidence and self-esteem will be enhanced if they recognise and understand references to these 'famous events'. Similarly, having heard of Magna Carta etc can be seen as a sign of being well-educated, another cause for enhanced self-esteem. I've most often felt the pull of this argument when teaching undergraduates who clearly felt a sense of relief and satisfaction when they realised how and when an event fitted into their own wobbly and vague mental timeline.

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However there are problems linked to this emphasis on ‘famous events’:

- It leads to very conservative choices of content and fails to encourage cultural and geographical variety in the curriculum. It discourages coverage of new areas of history being researched by historians.
- It may lead to coverage of events in isolation and so doesn’t build overviews and connections across time – achieving this requires far more thoughtful teaching than simply covering events in order
- It makes challenging students’ preconceptions about the period and its people harder as the majority of such cultural references relate to war, violence and disasters. Such references only deepen inaccurately negative perceptions of the period.
- Does one lesson on a topic at the age of 12 lead to long-lasting retention of knowledge? For most of us it doesn’t. Regular revisiting of key events later in KS3 within the context of continuing themes has more chance of achieving this but many so-called items of ‘historical general knowledge’ may not be the most important items for inclusion in such themes.

So, lots of caveats but it’s an aim worth debating. Should a department construct a list of such individual pieces of knowledge, the better to decide whether they are worth coverage?

In conclusion

There are of course, other justifications which are, perhaps, so obvious that they don’t need detailing:

- Preparing students for studying medieval history at GCSE and A level. Along with Dale Banham, I discussed the practicalities of this in Exploring and Teaching Medieval History here: https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/downloads/ETMHKS3.pdf
- Providing a context for studying topics and change in later periods but PLEASE NOT by assuming that the Middle Ages saw only continuities or, worse, stagnation!

And finally there’s the pleasure and excitements of studying such a distant and intriguing period which has left so much visible evidence in our landscape and whose legacies continue to influence our lives.

I’m sure you can think of others!

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