

The Riccall Mystery: How do we carry out historical enquiries?

Updated September 2023

This is a revised and extended version of the activity devised in 2003 for a textbook, *What is History? Year 7* (Hodder Education) and made available on this website in 2008 – the purpose of the activity is to introduce or consolidate the process of historical enquiry with students in KS2 or KS3.

I created that original version after watching ‘The Last of the Vikings’, the sixth and last programme a BBC TV series, *The Blood of the Vikings*, which contained a 10-minute section investigating skeletons found at Riccall in Yorkshire. This part of the programme created a genuine sense of puzzle and investigation, especially when discussing the results of scientific tests made in 2001 on the teeth and bones. These tests led the archaeologists on the programme to suggest that the skeletons belonged to Viking soldiers who had died at Stamford Bridge in 1066.

Twenty years later, however, I’ve revised the activity in the light of more recent interpretations published in the *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* in 2008 (it was quite a while before I found out about this article!) of the skeletal evidence at the heart of the activity. This article discusses new scientific evidence based on the development of more sophisticated scientific analysis of the bones, evidence which now strongly suggests that the skeletons were not those of Vikings but of people who were born and grew up in the area where they were buried and that they represent a normal cross-section of the local population i.e. children, women and men. This is a much less exciting conclusion for KS2 or KS3 students but including the new evidence and a further ‘rethinking your hypothesis’ stage actually strengthens the activity in that it demonstrates how the study of history involves constant reviewing of evidence and rethinking and reinterpretation of conclusions.

For this revision I have therefore added new clue cards about the later tests at the end of the sequence of evidence and revised the suggested sequence of teaching and learning activities.

The revised research is discussed in an article by R A Hall et al, 'The Medieval Cemetery at Riccall Landing: A Reappraisal' in the *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 80, 2008 – available online at

<https://archive.org/details/YAJ0802008/page/n5/mode/2up>

My thanks to Matt Springett and his colleagues at the Plume Academy in Maldon, Essex for telling me about this new evidence.

The Aims of the Activity

The purpose of this activity is to introduce or consolidate the process of historical enquiry with students in KS2 and KS3. This process involves stages of asking questions, creating a hypothesis, exploring evidence, revisiting the hypothesis etc. By the end of the activity, therefore, students should be able to move onto further enquiries, remembering and implementing with your help the enquiry process in the context of other topics and other kinds of evidence.

For detailed discussion of the enquiry process and its place in studying history see the Enquiry and Independent Learning section of this website at:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/EnquirySkill/index.htm>

The activity is divided into 3 stages:

1. Digging up the mystery
2. The enquiry into the Riccall skeletons
3. Debriefing – understanding the historical process

Setting Up

Set up the room so there is space at the front to organize some students along a Certainty-Uncertainty continuum or 'washing line'. Put a big notice saying CERTAINTY at one side of the room and another saying UNCERTAINTY at the other.

For Stage 1 (Digging up the mystery) you need the accompanying PowerPoint screen Clue A which shows some of the bones excavated at Riccall. Have this picture ready to reveal on

your whiteboard but hidden for the moment. You will also refer to trowels and brushes – but you don't need them as they're all in the imagination!

For Stage 2 (The enquiry into the Riccall skeletons) you will need the Additional Information card (which tells students about other finds additional to Clue A) and Clue Cards B to K. Note that the clues are not revealed in one go but in 4 phases as described in detail below. Clue H is also on the PowerPoint because the use of colour is important and showing it on screen may be easier than printing in colour.

For stage 3 (Debriefing), you need tabards for the historical process labelled:

- First evidence
- Ask questions
- First hypothesis
- More evidence
- Revised hypothesis

You may want to repeat the last two tabards to emphasise that historians keep on reviewing evidence and re-thinking conclusions – it's not a one-off stage.

Resources to Download

- Additional Information Card and Clue Cards B to K
- PowerPoint – clues A and H
- Certainty/Uncertainty cards
- Word cards – vocab
- Question dice

An additional PowerPoint on the Enquiry Process is available as part of the Debriefing or when you next carry out an enquiry to remind students quickly of the process at:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/EnquirySkill/EnquiryUsingPowerPoint.html>

Stage 1: Digging up the mystery

Your first task is to conjure up the scene of the discovery, drawing your students in so they think they are there! It only takes a minute or two but it's great for creating that 'Wow' factor – and for helping students forget the strains and excitements (?) of the previous lesson, break or lunchtime.

First get at least some of your students to come out to the front and kneel on the floor [if you've got space, get everyone doing it]. Next, all students close their eyes.

Now you create the scene with a description something like this:

“You're taking part in an archaeological dig, looking for evidence buried long ago. It's early morning. The sun is starting to warm your back but it rained yesterday. You can probably feel that the ground's still damp through the knees of your jeans. It's time to start work.

Pick up the trowel by your right knee. Start to scrape away the soil where you were digging yesterday. Careful! Just scrape gently. That's right, scrape carefully – Oh! What's that?[sound tremulous and excited!] I think I saw something gleam in the sun.

Put your trowel down. You don't want the sharp edge to damage what's there. Pick up your brush and very gently brush the soil away, that's it, very gently. I can see it now. Wow! It's looking incredible – this is quite a find ... you've done really well. This could be on TV!

Now when I count to 3, open your eyes and look up and see what you've found ..”

And that's when you reveal the bones on your screen (see PowerPoint slide) – hopefully to cries of 'Oooh' and 'Wow'!

Now ask – 'what questions do you want to ask about what you've found?'

This is an important task because asking questions is a much-neglected historical skill.

Depending on your class you might:

- build up a list of questions from class suggestions
- prompt students by providing a list of interrogative words – ‘Who?’ ‘Why?’ ‘How?’ etc for them to use in questions
- use the ‘question dice’ to prompt questions, asking students to come up with a question or questions using the word that turns up when the die is rolled.

Next is the delicate part – manoeuvring the list of questions so that you then investigate the ones that the material leads into – ‘Who were these people?’ and secondly ‘how did they die?’ – students’ interest and enthusiasm almost certainly dictates that you’ll need to include the second question!

Stage 2: The Core Enquiry

The enquiry is: **Who were these people and how did they die?**

The following steps take you through the enquiry – this stepped-approach is the most effective because it allows you to feed in the clues in manageable groups and, crucially, enables you to explain and discuss the process of enquiry while the task is continuing. Remember that the aim is to help students understand the process of enquiry – NOT to learn about the period of the burials.

Step 1. Show students the Additional Information card about other excavations and the number of skeletons found.

Now hand out Clue Cards B and C to each group. Give students a few minutes to examine and discuss this evidence, getting ideas about who the people were and how they died. [With some classes at least, give a clear time-limit and count it down to inject a sense of purpose and urgency.]

Then ask two groups at least what their ideas are about who the people were and how they died. [any groups not asked can be brought in when you begin using the ‘Certainty-Uncertainty’ washing line]. Stress to students that you’re not looking for certainty but for

ideas. As students provide answers focus on their use of language – pick out and praise use of hypothetical language – ‘possibly’, ‘might be’ etc.

After a couple of replies from groups, start to use the ‘Certainty-Uncertainty’ washing-line. Get one pupil from each group to stand on the washing line, showing whether their group is completely certain about who the people were and how they died (unlikely at this stage), completely uncertain or somewhere in the middle. If you wish you can ask a couple more groups at this stage to explain why they’re standing at that particular point. Also introduce the word ‘hypothesis’ and explain what it means – after all, each group should have a hypothesis, however uncertain, after looking at Clues B and C.

Why use the washing line? It’s to show that uncertainty is OK in History, it’s a stage in any new piece of work or enquiry and that, especially early on, it’s OK to be close to the uncertainty end. This ‘it’s OK to be uncertain’ may well be quite different from students’ expectations of what happens in History and from what’s expected in other subjects so it’s critical to make this explicit. You can also scatter word cards [‘may be’ ‘probably’ ‘opinion’ etc – provided in the Word cards PDF] along the washing line to reinforce the kind of language students should be using.

Step 2. Now hand out Clue Cards D-G and ask the pupils to reassess their initial ideas. Does this evidence support their ideas or does it contradict them – do they need to completely re-think their hypothesis? Again give the groups time to look carefully at the clues, making sure they’re aware of how much time they have. Then ask one or two groups about their revised hypothesis and whether their level of certainty has changed. Having done this, ask one person from each group to again take up their group’s position on the washing-line. Discuss their ideas, focus again on vocabulary and which clues have led them to shift their positions (Typically pupils become more certain – though not completely so – and they can see this explicitly by their movement along the washing line).

Step 3. Now look at Clue H on the screen (see PowerPoint slide) or hand out Clue Card H if you’ve colour printed it. This clue reveals the results of the scientific tests undertaken c2000 – that the six people whose skeletons were examined grew up in the areas shaded blue on the map. This led some archaeologists to suggest the skeletons may be members of Hardrada’s Viking army defeated at Stamford Bridge and killed during the flight back to their ships at Riccall.

You will need to explain this scientific evidence carefully before asking students to re-assess their ideas. Are they all now standing at the Certainty end of the line – or do they still have doubts, perhaps based on the fact that only a few of the skeletons were examined by scientists or on the female skeletons.

Step 4. Now move onto the more recent evidence, Clue Cards I to K, based on the scientific evidence published in the *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal in 2008*. These clues lead to a different conclusion – that the overall group of skeletons belong to a locally born population and include men, women and children. It's still possible that a couple of the skeletons died from violence, which could be linked to the battles of 1066 but could have had other causes. This is therefore a very different overall conclusion. At least three of the authors of the 2008 article had also been involved in the TV programme c2001 so had changed their minds about the origins of the skeletons because of the results from the new scientific tests they'd carried out.

Stage 3: Debriefing – Understanding the Enquiry Process

These are the key takeaways – they key points about the Enquiry process and how we study history that you want students to take away from this activity and re-use in future lessons. Therefore it's important to take time to identify the stages of the Enquiry process and relate them back to the Riccall activity just completed – otherwise this is just a 'fun' mystery activity with no lasting value to students.

Step 1. Stand 5 pupils in a cluster at the front of the class, each wearing one of the tabards labelled to show the process – make sure they're in a random arrangement, not the correct sequence! The 5 labels are shown below in (3).

Step 2. Now ask the class to say which of the tabards describes the first task in their enquiry (first evidence). Get this pupil to stand at the start of the Process-Line. Consolidate this by referring back to the skeleton activity – what did we do at this stage?

Step 3. Then get the class to identify the next part of the process and then the next, till all 5 pupils are standing in the correct order on the Process Line.

- First evidence
- Ask questions
- First hypothesis
- More evidence
- Revised hypothesis

Other important takeaways – key points to make in the debriefing:

a) It's OK to be uncertain in History! Students often expect everything in History to be certain but this activity has demonstrated that it's normal, part of the process, to move from uncertainty along a line towards greater certainty – and it's easier if you have the vocabulary to explain the extent of your certainty/uncertainty.

b) Historians and archaeologists often change their minds when they learn new things or use new evidence. It's important to realise that you are allowed to change your mind when you find new evidence or information.

c) This is a process you'll use again to help you study more effectively. It may be helpful to make a comparison to another subject with its own commonly-used process (Science?). Emphasise that History isn't just a lot of different things but a lot of enquiries – and knowing how to tackle an enquiry will give students more confidence and help them learn more easily and effectively (and so it helps if they re-use the enquiry process fairly soon!)

And for Next Time ...

You could use the linked PowerPoint on the Enquiry process as part of the Debriefing or when you next carry out an enquiry to remind students quickly of the process.

However it would work much better if you create your own showing your own students undertaking the activity!

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/EnquirySkill/EnquiryUsingPowerPoint.html>

And Finally ...

This activity works well with teachers at CPD courses so if you're ever doing whole school CPD looking at similarities and differences between subjects (or even showing parents what happens in History lessons) then this activity is worth trying.

Just one warning – make sure those colleagues who kneel down to excavate can also get up again without help!