

Different kinds of knowledge

What do we want KS3 students to know about the Middle Ages?’

Over the last year I’ve been planning on-line materials for Y7, aiming to give students a deeper and more balanced knowledge of the Middle Ages. In doing this it’s been important to identify different types of knowledge that Y7 students could build up. What I’ve set out below is a list of different types of knowledge, together with notes about the issues they raise. It’s not deeply philosophical but may assist others in thinking about what they want Y7 students to know about the Middle Ages.

One further introductory note to explain some of what follows - a central part of my planning over the years (first started in 1978!) has been defining what I’d like students to ‘take away’ from their work on a period or individual topic. I find that identifying these takeaways sharpens my thinking in creating any resource, whether the takeaways relate to historical content or to the process of history or about how the study of history helps us understand the world around us today. To exemplify this, I’ve included an appendix at the end of this article a set of knowledge takeaways about medieval Britain which first appeared in the Historical Association publication *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History*.

Types of knowledge (in no order of priority)

1. Placing the Middle Ages in context – where does it fit into wider chronology and why ‘Middle’? Possibly could also look at sub-divisions of the Middle Ages, overlaps with other periods, suitability for use with other cultures.

See for example opening pages of resources [HERE](#)

2. Knowledge of individual events and people – what took place (i.e. the ‘story’ of events) and issues related to causes and consequences, significance and, on occasion, interpretations.

For many of us over the years, it’s this kind of knowledge that has dominated planning – we can all reel off a list of familiar events ‘Norman Conquest, Becket, Crusades etc etc’ but if these individual events are too dominant in planning students won’t develop other kinds of knowledge listed below.

The other general point here is that, while studying an individual event, students are also implicitly building a broader picture of the Middle Ages. Therefore a scheme of work dominated by wars and plague does not allow students to build up a balanced picture of the period. It’s therefore important

to think about which events and people are taught and the details within those topics, as discussed [HERE](#) ‘Choosing content to create a more balanced picture of the Middle Ages at KS3’

3. Knowledge of what was going on in people’s minds - the ideas, ideals, attitudes, principles and priorities that determined people’s decisions and actions.

Such knowledge, with the exception of religion, is often left implicit or tackled within the context of individual events. However it’s important to teach explicitly about this and make it central to study of a period. This, I think, is best done before tackling any individual event – even the Norman Conquest! This allows you to bring what’s been learned about ideas and principles to bear on investigating an event rather than trying to work backwards from event to ideas and principles. If you work backwards students may well explain motives and actions in the light of their often negative preconceptions about the thinking of medieval people.

4. Knowledge of an overview or overviews of the period – a much broader kind of knowledge than that created by studying events and people individually. However even this heading masks a variety of overviews which, for the sake of clarity, I’ll identify as:

a) overviews of individual themes across the whole period – the power of the monarchy, the relationship between England and different parts of Britain, standards of living etc. Such themes help students understand the importance of individual events in the broader period, reinforce their sense of the chronology of the period and give coherence to KS3 as a whole, linking medieval events and developments to events beyond the ‘witching hour’ of 1485 (or whichever end point you use).

b) overviews of themes such as population, urbanisation, climatic change, harvest patterns and patterns of plague. I could have included these in (a) above but, despite them being centrally important for people at the time, for understanding individual periods and to the longer spans of history, they can fall out of view because teaching them may not be triggered by individual events.

Another theme in this category (raised by item 3 above) is that of changes and continuities in ideas, ideals, attitudes, principles and priorities (or however you express this) over the whole period covered at KS3. This seems central to our sense of any period but again I suspect is not taught explicitly – perhaps this is something to explore?

c) the broadest kinds of overview encompassing a variety of events and developments and criss-crossing across the kinds of themes identified in (a) and (b). These could be studied across c1000 to c1500 or by splitting that period in two (at 1348?) or by tackling overviews of centuries, though this may be more relevant to GCSE and A level as context for depth studies.

All such overviews should identify patterns of change and continuity – major changes, what changed relatively little or remained the same, the pace of change. This is worth emphasising in relation to the Middle Ages because it's all too easy for students to assume that this period saw little or no change and was even a time of stagnation. This is all too easy an impression to develop if knowledge of individual events dominates planning.

The major question is obviously how great a part such overviews play in a scheme of work? Are they the bedrock, illuminated and/or challenged by depth studies (as envisaged by the 2008 version of the National Curriculum) or are they 'extras', making an occasional appearance amidst the depth enquiries but liable to be omitted if time is lost. Or maybe they don't get a look in at all? In part their absence may be explained by a lack of suitable resources.

One final point - whatever the nature of the overview it needs to be seen and understood in one lesson, even if study is then extended over a number of lessons.

Further discussion of the teaching of overviews with specific examples and resources can be seen [HERE](#)

5. Knowledge of other cultures and places – the KS3 curriculum has long been Anglocentric, partly at least because the structure of schemes of work has been strongly driven by individual events. However the acquisition of knowledge about other cultures has many advantages and should be carried out for its own sake, rather than as a comparative exercise with medieval Britain.

Again the availability of resources has been a problem but see <https://meanwhileelsewhereinhistory.wordpress.com/>

6. Knowledge of the way medieval history is studied – particularly the types of sources historians use rather than focussing on generic approaches to understanding of the use of evidence. I won't go into detail on this here as I've already explored this [HERE](#)

Concluding comments and questions

Talking about ‘knowledge’ in general and planning around a list of individual events does not make for effective planning for teaching Y7 about the Middle Ages. We need to be much more specific about the balance of types of knowledge we want students to take away within the teaching time available and how this relates to the whole KS3 history curriculum.

The study of individual events does not by itself produce knowledge of overviews – they need to be studied individually.

All the individual topics studied help create an overall sense of period - even if that is not planned for. Therefore an unthought-through and unbalanced choice of content will create a misleading view of the period, cementing negative preconceptions of the Middle Ages.

Questions:

Where do you place the balance in terms of the different types of knowledge?

What kinds of knowledge will help prepare students for GCSE without distorting their understanding of the medieval world? See the discussion [HERE](#)

How can knowledge of the Middle Ages help students understand the world around them today?

Resources to be developed - I am developing a range of resources to fit in with these types of knowledge. I plan to work on overviews in the autumn of 2019 and the early part of the following year.

Appendix: Possible ‘takeaway’ knowledge about the Middle Ages

This set of knowledge takeaways about medieval Britain first appeared in the Historical Association publication *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History*. They cover broad areas of knowledge rather than takeaways about individual events and can be linked to developments in later periods, thus creating a sense of KS3 History as a coherent whole.

People’s quality of life was greatly affected by the quality of the harvest, which in turn depended on changes both in climate and in the weather. Successive harvest failures could lead to great hardship and the danger of starvation for some.

The population grew quickly until the early 1300s, then fell by up to 50% with the onset of the Black Death. These changes in population affected prosperity and freedom. In the fifteenth century living standards for many were higher than over the next three centuries.

Life-expectancy and health were similar in this period to other periods apart from that since the late nineteenth century. People tried to safeguard their health, especially trying to improve public health in periods of plague.

Ideas about science and medicine were very different from ours but were detailed, carefully-studied and logical in terms of the world-view of the period, scholars sought new ideas and universities developed.

Christianity was the official religion in Britain though its ideas were sometimes questioned. Ideas of heaven, hell and purgatory had a great influence on many people's actions. The Church's holy days determined working patterns and created many opportunities for rest and community activities.

The Church in England was part of wider Christendom, under the authority of the Pope, and was very wealthy. Abbeys played a significant part in trade and in providing care for the poor.

The vast majority of people lived in villages and were agricultural workers, hard physical work shared by women and children. Many towns grew or were founded in the early part of this period.

Women were regarded as under the command of their menfolk though in practice individual women ran businesses or their husbands' estates and gave their husbands advice on many issues.

Britain was closely connected to the rest of Europe through trade. England's strong links with Scandinavia were ended by the Norman Conquest. After this, French culture and language had a major influence in England and politics was strongly affected by disputes and wars with France.

England was the richest and most powerful part of Britain and English lords gradually took over Wales but had little impact in Ireland. Scotland fought successfully to remain independent.

Wars were chiefly fought for the King's glory and to defend his lands and power. Crusades against non-Christians in the Middle East and Europe continued unevenly throughout this period.

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.

People were just as intelligent (or not!) as in later centuries and shared many emotions and ideals with people today. By the 1400s literacy levels were rising and printing developed.