

# Enquiry: developing puzzling, enjoyable, effective historical investigations

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About 2,000 years ago, a baby was born. No, not that baby. Not Jesus. This baby was a girl. Where she was born and what she was called we don't know but I'll call her Helena – it feels rude to go on just calling her 'she'. When Helena grew up she became wealthy. Perhaps she was married to a rich merchant trading goods across Britannia and the Roman empire. Perhaps she inherited wealth from her father. Perhaps her husband was a retired Roman soldier who had settled in the Roman town of Camulodonum, which we know as Colchester.

What we do know is that Helena lived in Camulodonum, in a good house on the main street which is still known as the High Street today. She was there in AD61 when the news came that the Iceni, led by their queen, Boudicca, had risen in revolt. Was Helena afraid? Perhaps not immediately, though the bulk of the Roman army was away campaigning in north Wales. There was still the 9th Legion, comprising 2,000 legionaries and 500 cavalry, but it never arrived to defend Camulodonum. En route to the town it was attacked and the legionaries annihilated by the Iceni. Only the cavalry escaped.

When Helena heard that the Iceni were nearby she probably fled with her neighbours and friends to the Roman temple, the most defensible building in the town, but before she left her home she did one thing – she took her jewellery and hid it beneath the floor of her house.

Helena never returned to recover her belongings. She almost certainly died as the Iceni swept through Camulodonum and massacred the inhabitants. The town was burnt to the ground.

Despite that destruction we know exactly what Helena buried, just as if we had been looking over her shoulder 2,000 years ago, as she hurriedly packed away her most treasured belongings. Modern Colchester (along with St Albans and London) has a layer of Boudiccan destruction debris containing the burnt remains of buildings, pottery and even furniture and foods and in 2014 archaeologists excavated the site of Helena's home. Beneath the floor level of that home in the

main street the archaeologists uncovered Helena's treasures – a small jewellery box perhaps made of thin silver, five small gold finger-rings (four with gems and one with the engraved picture of a dolphin), a pair of silver bracelets, a large silver armlet, a short silver chain, perhaps with a pendant, three gold bracelets, a pair of gold earrings, another pair of pearl and gold earrings and a small bag or purse containing silver coins.

Also found amidst the excavated debris were the charred remains of food, either Helena's larder or perhaps a meal being prepared when she fled. There were also human bones, the first time that human remains from the revolt have been found in Colchester.

You can find out more online about what's known as the 'Fenwick Roman Hoard' but by now you'll be asking: How can we use this discovery in the classroom? I think it's the natural opening to an Enquiry, indeed a series of enquiries, just as here I've used it as the way in to discussing just what we mean by Enquiry in the history classroom and why Enquiry is so important.

## Why is Enquiry so important in history lessons?

Enquiry involves asking questions about the past and finding answers by exploring the sources left from the past – finds such as Helena's jewellery. I'll come back to a more detailed discussion of what Enquiry is shortly but, first, why is this investigative process so important?

It would be easy to answer this question by saying 'it's in the National Curriculum' but that would be doing an injustice to the role of Enquiry in history. Anyone 'doing' history, from pupils in primary school to adult historians carrying out research and writing books, is undertaking Enquiries, that is aiming to answer questions and so deepen their and our knowledge and understanding. Enquiry is one of the cornerstones of the discipline of history, but what is particularly important in school history is that it provides a common thread as children progress and mature from primary to secondary school.

Figure 1: Images of the Colchester excavation  
The Colchester Archaeological Trust



One reason children can find history difficult is that they feel they're constantly starting again. They think each new topic is completely different because it features new names, dates, places and so on. This new detail acts as camouflage, preventing children realising that they can use what they've learned before about how to 'do history' to help them with a new topic. This is where Enquiry is so central. Following the same Enquiry process on each new historical topic or period gives children confidence because they know the steps to take in exploring a new topic. They can be excited and intrigued by meeting new people, situations and events but have the anchor of knowing that they know how to carry out their investigation. This breeds confidence, the confidence that is so important for successful learning at all ages. Thus what children learn about undertaking enquiries in Y3 is useful in Y5 and is still useful in Y10 and Y12 – they *can* use what they have learned before.

For this to happen, of course, teachers have to make this Enquiry process explicit or visible so that children know what they're doing,

### Enquiry in the 2014 National Curriculum

Happily the National Curriculum recognises the centrality of Enquiry in the discipline of history as these extracts from the 2014 National Curriculum document demonstrate. Note the continued emphasis on asking questions, constructing answers or accounts and using sources to support those answers. These emphases continue into the new GCSE framework to be implemented in 2016.

#### Purpose of study

A high-quality history education will ... inspire pupils' curiosity to know more about the past. Teaching should equip pupils to ask perceptive questions, think critically, weigh evidence, sift arguments, and develop perspective and judgement.

#### Aims

[Pupils should] ... understand the methods of historical enquiry, including how evidence is used rigorously to make historical claims, and discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed

#### KS1

They should ask and answer questions, choosing and using parts of stories and other sources to show that they know and understand key features of events.

#### KS2

They should regularly address and sometimes devise historically valid questions .... They should construct informed responses that involve thoughtful selection and organisation of relevant historical information. They should understand how our knowledge of the past is constructed from a range of sources.

#### KS3

They should pursue historically valid enquiries including some they have framed themselves, and create relevant, structured and evidentially supported accounts in response. They should understand how different types of historical sources are used rigorously to make historical claims ...

can describe what they're doing and go on to use what they have learned with increasing independence as they mature – more on this later!

## What is Enquiry? The process in outline

The Enquiry process helps children move from knowing nothing or next to nothing about a topic to having a satisfying grasp of the topic and being able to answer questions about it with confidence – be they informal oral answers or demanding written answers. As stressed above, children can use this process as a template when faced with new enquiries on other topics. So what is the process of Enquiry?

My pragmatic outline definition is as follows – using the discovery in Colchester which introduced this article as an example:

### Stage 1

Show children one or two pieces of evidence  
*A picture or pictures of the jewellery found in Colchester – maybe a close-up and a picture of where it was found.*

### Stage 2

Prompt children to ask questions about this evidence  
*For example – What is it? How old is it? Who owned it? Where was it found?*

### Stage 3 –

Prompt children to suggest answers (which we can call hypotheses) to some of the questions and maybe to think about which of their questions are the most important to answer

*For example – perhaps it was owned by someone rich, a woman, maybe a queen. They look like rings and jewels*

### Stage 4

Provide more information and evidence for children to explore to see if they can find answers to their questions

*For example – a description of the site of the finds, a list of the finds, the story of what happened to Roman Colchester in AD61, pictures of other Roman jewellery. This is the lengthiest stage and could be broken up into sections. It's at this stage that children can use textbooks, source material, pictures and web resources to build up and deepen their knowledge of the topic.*

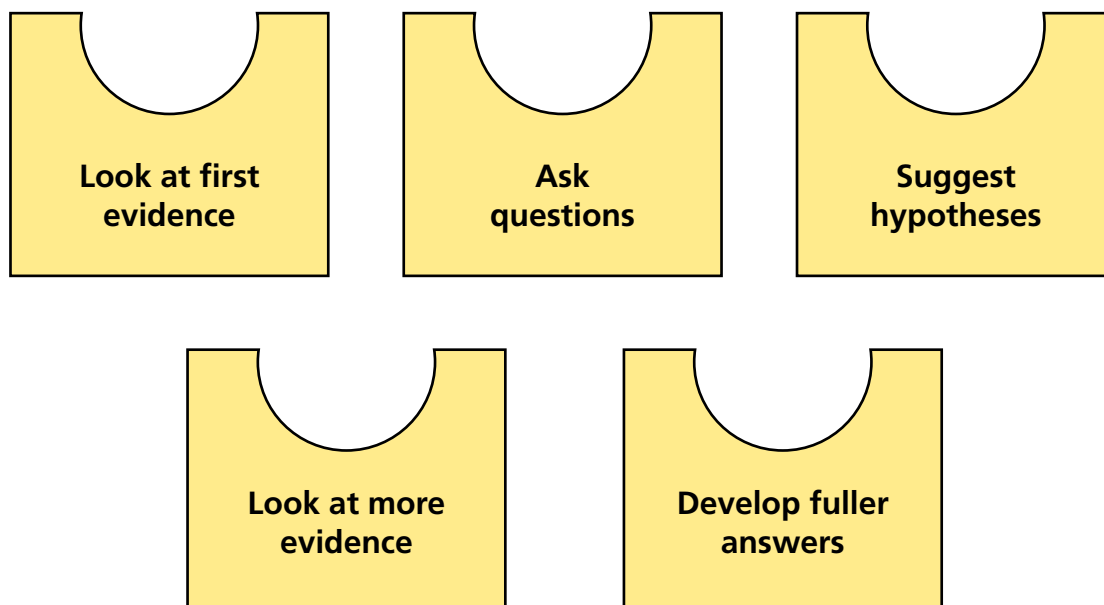
### Stage 5

Develop stronger answers supported by evidence  
*For example in summary – the jewellery was owned by a rich Roman woman. She hid it when the Iceni were attacking her town but never came back to find it again.*

*[Stages 4 and 5 could be repeated so that children never spend too long on exploring the topic without*

Figure 2: Tabards showing five stages of process

A set of sugar-paper tabards showing the process of Enquiry. To create a tabard simply fold a piece of sugar paper in half, cut a hole for the head to go through and write on it what you wish – a name, a historical period or in this case a stage in the process.



coming back to and thinking about their answers to the enquiry question or questions.]

This outline definition of the process could be debated. Occasionally teachers at courses have asserted that this pattern is 'wrong' in some way or begins with the 'wrong' item, but such theorising and dogmatism seems to get in the way of a broadly useful idea. What's really important is having a readily comprehensible and communicable sequence of activities that students can describe, apply and continue to apply as their history studies continue – and which therefore helps them tackle their history more effectively and more confidently. Hence the importance of these stages being explicit and becoming part of classroom vocabulary. One way to make the process clear is to use sugar-paper tabards as shown in Figure 2. Five children wear the tabards and stand in the sequence of the process. The teacher and ideally the class can then use the information on the tabards as prompts to describe the process they have undertaken. (Or, later, mix up the sequence of tabards to test children's ability to sort out the process they've carried out.)

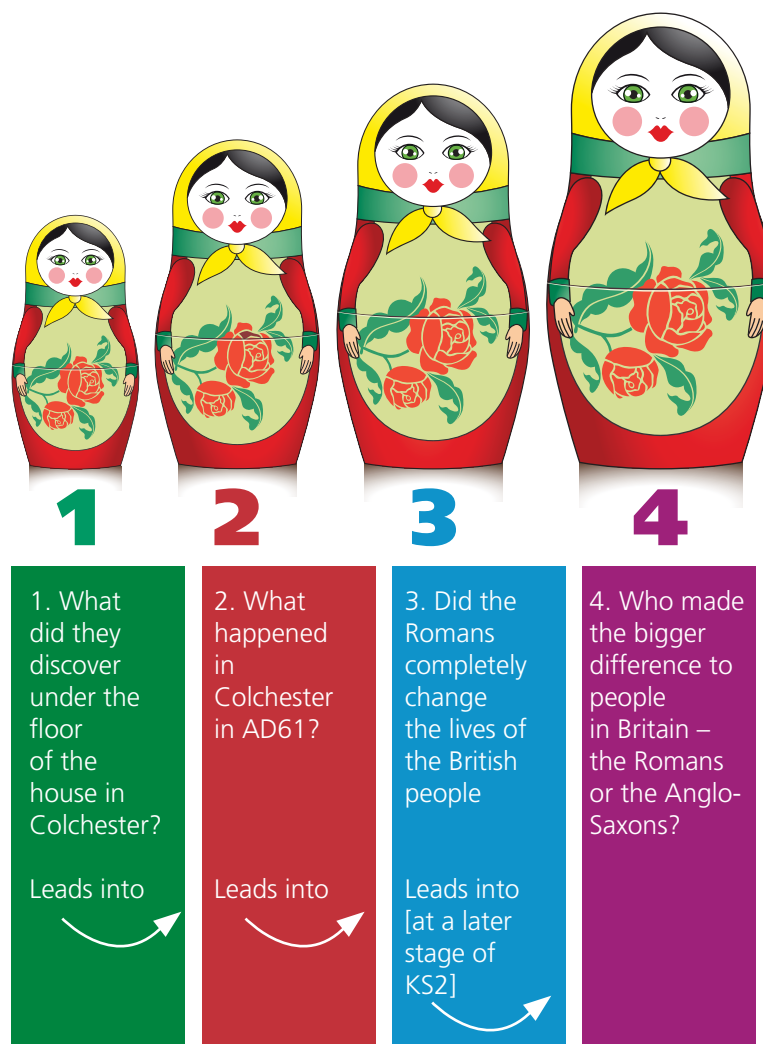
It's equally important that children appreciate that Enquiry is a common thread in their study of history. It may seem repetitive but it's a low-key repetition built around reminders such as 'do you remember when we did ....?' 'How did we begin?' 'what did we do next?' All this stops the process being completely masked by the change from Romans to Saxons or another new historical topic.

### How big is an Enquiry?

'Enquiries' are sometimes seen as one-off 'mystery' items but this underestimates their value and role. An Enquiry can last an hour, a morning, be continued across half a term or even longer. The Enquiry may begin by focusing on a single discovery (as with the Roman jewellery found at Colchester) but such a mystery enquiry is best seen as a 'mystery starter', an intriguing doorway into a much more substantial enquiry. Again using the Colchester discovery as an example, think of it as the smallest of a series of Russian dolls, as shown in Figure 3.

In all these Enquiries students would follow the same Enquiry process, beginning with a little evidence, asking questions and following through the process described above, albeit taking longer over the stages as they examine more material when investigating, for example 'Did the Romans completely change the lives of the British people?' than when investigating 'What did they discover under the floor of the house in Colchester?'

Figure 3: Thinking of different levels of enquiry as a set of 'Russian dolls' helps planning across a year and across Key Stage 2.



This kind of planning would therefore avoid the danger of a 'mystery' being a one-off activity and so having limited value because whatever is learned about the process of Enquiry isn't then being re-used and consolidated in the bulk of the course.

It's also important to point out that, while using sources is an integral part of Enquiry, carrying out a lengthy Enquiry (such as one into the impact of the Romans or the Anglo-Saxons on life in Britain) involves the normal range of teaching resources and activities – books, role-plays, extended sources, reading, story and so on – all of which are used to provide evidence for building, testing and revising hypotheses. Enquiry is simply a process within which you use your normal activities – it implies nothing particular about the material or activities you use.

And a final point on planning Enquiry work across KS2. Having a scheme of work full of enthusing but teacher-defined Enquiry questions is not enough to develop students' understanding of Enquiry if all the posing of questions and structuring of Enquiry is done by the teacher. It's really important that children develop their ability to ask their own good historical questions,

## A variety of types of Enquiry questions – the list could be a lot longer!

What ...?  
When ...?  
Who ...?  
How ...?  
Did people really ...?  
How do we know ...?  
Was it really ...?  
Why did...?  
What caused ...?  
How much did people's lives change ... ?  
Who/what was the most significant ...?  
What can we learn from this ...?  
How was our town affected by ...?  
Who benefited from ...?  
Does X deserve to have the title of ... ['the Great' etc]?  
Why is it so difficult to find out about...?  
Who should we remember the most....?  
Why do historians disagree about...?  
Why are there different interpretations of...?  
How can we find out about ...?

especially at an age when asking questions comes more naturally than later, when adolescence seems to limit that skill! An effective scheme must help students build the ability to ask their own questions and plan their own way through enquiries, simultaneously using and developing their understanding of historical enquiry.

One way to do this is to have a wall-display of different types of historical questions, creating a menu or set of reminders of the kinds of questions we ask. Just a set of interrogative words can help but the full-blown questions are an even greater stimulus. They don't have to be on the topic being studied – in fact, it's better if they're not, so that children have to adapt the type of question to the specific context. A list of such model questions is above and a larger version is in our poster.

## Making Enquiry physically active and visible – and enjoyable

All of which probably sounds very worthy. Where's the excitement and wonder of history? Where's the activity that both engages children and will help them understand the process in a way that just words may not? Here are two brief ideas that you can find developed on my website [www.thinkinghistory.co.uk](http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk).

1. Begin the Enquiry with children kneeling on the floor, their eyes closed. Each has an imaginary trowel and brush within reach. Tell them they're archaeologists beginning the day's work and they're about to explore ... well, that's the mystery! Tell them to pick up their trowel, then talk them through trowelling some soil away ... carefully now! ... what's that gleam in the soil? Better use the brush, it's gentler, now very carefully, brush away some more soil and ... wow ... that's amazing, what a discovery! And it's at this point that you reveal the picture on your screen, a picture of the jewellery from Roman Colchester. What questions do you want to ask? And so your enquiry is under way.
2. As children develop answers to their questions, stress that you're not immediately looking for certainty but for ideas. To emphasise this use a physical 'Certainty-Uncertainty' washing-line. This means creating a line across the floor of your room as you can see in Figure 4. Ask children to stand on the washing line, showing whether they are completely certain, mostly certain etc. Why use the washing line? It's to emphasise 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. Doing this physically with physical movement gets this point across much more strongly than the words can do by themselves. As the Enquiry progresses children may well move farther towards certainty. Again, coming back after some more work to stand farther along the line than before helps them appreciate what they have learned and how this Enquiry process works.

You can also use vocabulary cards (see Figure 5) by scattering them alongside the washing line to reinforce the kind of language students should be using. As students provide answers, focus on their use of language – pick out and praise use of hypothetical language such as '*possibly*', '*might be*' and so on.

Figure 4: Certainty – uncertainty continuum

Asking children to stand on a 'washing-line' to represent how certain they feel about their answers is an important way of developing understanding of enquiry and giving them permission to be uncertain as an Enquiry develops.

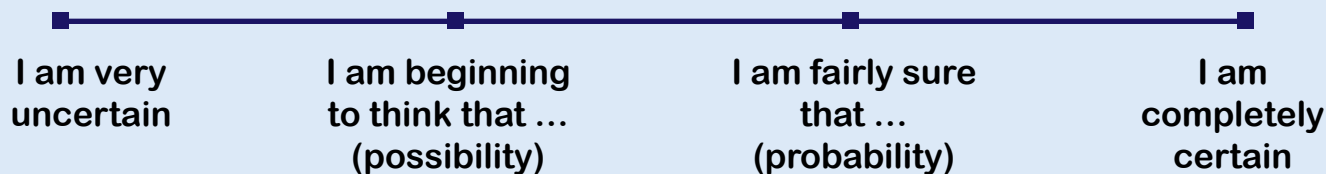


Figure 5: Enquiry vocabulary cards

## Important words and phrases for use in enquiries

possibly

probably

perhaps

might

could

fairly

maybe

not sure

I think ...

sure

certain

my hypothesis is ...

I'd like to know ...

I wonder if ...

I'm beginning to think that ...

## How does Enquiry make work at historical sites and museums more worthwhile?

Another virtue of the Enquiry process is that it can be an extremely useful way of integrating work in school with work carried out during visits to museums and historic sites. Such visits build children's enthusiasm and awareness of the past, their knowledge and understanding of a topic or period but can also be fitted in productively at different stages of the Enquiry process as suggested below.

### 1 – Using a visit to initiate an Enquiry

Use the site at the very beginning of an Enquiry to stimulate questions and create initial hypotheses. Then return to school to use other resources to test and develop those hypotheses and build fuller answers to the questions. For example, take a question such as 'Did the Romans change the way the Britons lived?' One very good way to start, to begin developing an answer, is to go to a Roman site or a museum with Roman objects and use the evidence there, making comparisons with what children have already learned about life in prehistoric Britain – what does the evidence of the site tell you that begins to answer the question? Then take those hypotheses and follow them up using a wider range of resources in school.

### 2 – Using a visit to build up answers children have already suggested in school

Begin the process in school with children suggesting answers to questions. Then undertake the site or museum visit to see if their answers stand up against the evidence they see, whether it's a building or a range of objects in a museum or an interpretation presented by an actor at the site. For example, children may be exploring the everyday life of the Anglo-Saxons and could begin to build an answer using books, pictures and sources in the classroom. Then use a visit to your their local museum or site to test their hypotheses and build better answers, using evidence they have now seen and even touched.

Using either of these approaches has two other benefits. First it requires that the visit is embedded in a sequence of lessons – school–visit–school – rather than being a one-off 'trip' whose value is likely to be limited precisely because it is just a one-off. Second these approaches mean that teachers accompanying the trip have to be fully involved because the activities link closely to what's happened before and what will happen in succeeding lessons. A visit should never be an opportunity to hand over completely to museum or site staff – if you do, how are you going to build on the children's experiences?

## Conclusion

History in schools should always be about people. It's also about how we know about those people and, when the opportunity arises, should help children

realise that we are often discovering more about the past. History isn't a cut-and-dried subject in which we already know all there is to know. The Enquiry process is central to understanding how we know and how certain we can be about the past. It helps children appreciate history as an investigative discipline, a voyage of discovery into the lives and deeds of our ancestors. Perhaps above all it can help them visualise the moment, so long ago, when a frightened woman in Camulodonum hid her precious jewellery and then what it was like to be the archaeologist who first saw those same rings and bracelets after they had lain hidden for 2,000 years. History. It's magic!

**Ian Dawson** has been a teacher and teacher-trainer and has written a range of books for the classroom. His website, [thinkinghistory.co.uk](http://thinkinghistory.co.uk), provides free resources and discussions for teachers from KS2 to A-level.



## Websites

**Archaeology in Colchester** – the discovery of the Roman jewellery  
[www.thecolchesterarchaeologist.co.uk/?p=15398](http://www.thecolchesterarchaeologist.co.uk/?p=15398)

**Past Horizons** – a source for archaeological discoveries  
[www.pasthorizonspr.com/index.php/archives/09/2014/colchesters-hidden-roman-treasure](http://www.pasthorizonspr.com/index.php/archives/09/2014/colchesters-hidden-roman-treasure)

**Thinkinghistory** – provides activities and discussions of history teaching including material for the KS2 History National Curriculum  
[www.thinkinghistory.co.uk](http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk)

A role-play on Boudicca's rebellion designed to help children understand the story of events  
[www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/BoudiccasRebellion.html](http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/BoudiccasRebellion.html)

New discoveries to keep history bubbling – a section of the Thinkinghistory site dedicated to identifying useful new archaeological discoveries  
[www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/UsingNewDiscoveries.php](http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/UsingNewDiscoveries.php)

**The Historical Association's** extensive guidance for teaching Primary History  
[www.history.org.uk/resources/primary.html](http://www.history.org.uk/resources/primary.html)

**Schools History Project** – website provides a range of discussions on planning for the KS2 History NC and related activities  
[www.schoolshistoryproject.org.uk](http://www.schoolshistoryproject.org.uk)