

Choosing content to create a more balanced picture of the Middle Ages at KS3

My starting point is the importance of giving Y7 students a balanced picture of the Middle Ages and its people. This is true of any period of history but particularly relevant to the Middle Ages because many students have strongly negative preconceptions about the period. These preconceptions need to be challenged directly in order to change them. Yes, there were many wars, plague and much cruelty but there was also intelligence, morality, loyalty, charity and a sense of community. Students should be aware of all these facets of life during the Middle Ages.

If we are to challenge students' negative preconceptions then careful thought needs to be given to the content to be taught. This goes much further than identifying broad topics (such as The Norman Conquest or the Black Death) and the specific enquiry questions used to explore these topics. We need to give far deeper consideration to the details covered within these topics. Part 1 of this article uses the example of the reign of Richard III to begin exploring this issue; Part 2 moves on to raise possibilities for coverage of other much-taught medieval topics.

These issues are exemplified in the resources available [HERE](#) which are being built around the overall enquiry question 'Are people right to be so negative about the Middle Ages?'

Part 1: The example of Richard III

KS3 teaching about Richard III is most likely to explore the 'murder mystery' of the fate of Edward V and his brother, the Princes in the Tower, aiming to develop students' understanding of the nature of sources and how we use them as evidence. The Battle of Bosworth may also be taught, perhaps building in evidence about Richard's death provided by the discovery of his skeleton.

The problem with teaching about being Richard III's reign being dominated by murder and warfare is that it will cement students' negative perceptions of the later Middle Ages and its people. Students may well assume that the murder of children was accepted by contemporaries as part and parcel of high politics and that kings and noblemen were motivated solely by uncontrolled and uncontrollable ambition for wealth and power. The implicit message is that medieval people exemplify humanity at its worst and were in moral deficit compared with people today.

However even the reign of Richard III can be taught in a more balanced way. This means choosing content which explicitly helps students understand that many medieval people:

- were intelligent, thoughtful and had a strong sense of community
- used their intelligence to attempt to solve complex problem in all aspects of life
- exhibited similar emotions to ourselves, including kindness, friendship and love and who believed in the importance of behaving with morality, loyalty and honour.

Taking an alternative approach is not about omitting the negative elements or whitewashing either Richard III or the whole period. It's about providing students with a more balanced and, therefore, more accurate picture of the period and the people who lived through the events of this reign.

Creating this more balanced portrayal of human behaviour during the reign of Richard III is difficult, NOT because it can't be done but because it requires knowledge of events that are rarely taught outside A level. If you don't have this knowledge already you won't know it's there to be discovered – plus it's not likely to be a priority when there's so many other pressures on teachers' time. This is a continuing problem with teaching about the Middle Ages, given that only a minority of teachers have studied medieval history in any depth at university and even then it's such a huge period that no-one can hope to master every topic.

So, what can be taught about Richard III to balance the picture created by the disappearance of Edward V and his brother? My answer lies in the events that followed their disappearance. In brief:

- the rebellion of the autumn of 1483 (widespread across southern England) which aimed to restore Edward V to the throne but then, once rumours spread that the princes were dead, planned to make Henry, earl of Richmond king.
- Richard III's attempts to solve the security and governmental problems in the south created by the flight of rebels to Brittany after the rebellion. Richard had to make new appointments in each of the southern counties and to decide who would be given the rebels' lands. Were Richard's choices carefully thought through or blindly supportive of his own favourites?

I don't have space here for further detail but you can read more in two chapters from my introductory book for A level (2012). They are proof chapters, hence some missing pictures:

- *How certain can we be about why Richard III took the crown? [HERE](#)*
- *Was Richard III defeated because of the disappearance of the Princes? [HERE](#)*

What can students learn from studying these events? They reveal that:

- People had a wide range of motives for joining the rebellion and they included morality, exemplified by the outrage at the assumed murder of the Princes. Morality did matter to people at the time.
- Kings such as Richard III faced complex problems in governing England and they tried intelligent solutions to those problems although sometimes problems were too great to solve

Part 1: Conclusions

Coverage of the rebellion of 1483 and its aftermath will create a different perspective on the people of the Middle Ages. In fairness to those people we should try to include such evidence of positive actions and attitudes and so not concentrate so extensively on the negative aspects of life. To do this we need to:

1. Identify the precise details covered in teaching each topic about the Middle Ages
2. Audit those details to identify how each will, implicitly or explicitly, influence students' perceptions of the period as a whole.
3. Review whether students are receiving a balanced picture of the period – and then take steps to adjust this if necessary.

Part 2: Beginning to think about other medieval topics

In planning teaching about medieval topics there are, in an ideal world, four elements to consider:

1. What is most important for students to know about each topic
2. What each topic reveals about the period as a whole

3. How topic contribute to broader themes across time e.g. power and democracy, standards of living
4. How the topic can develop students' understanding of the process of history, which may include knowledge of the particular kinds of sources surviving from the Middle Ages

Of these elements, number 2 is most likely to be omitted from planning but, as argued above, it's important to offer students opportunities to identify positive aspects of the period. I've set out below some aspects of commonly-taught topics which could help develop a greater respect for people of the Middle Ages. This does not mean omitting details which paint a more negative picture but there's plenty of those already in most schemes of work!

Three further important points about this list:

- I haven't tried to cover all the major topics taught at KS3, just enough to illustrate the possibilities
- It's a list of possible details to include – not all need to be included to affect perceptions of the period, and there are other possibilities too
- Some of these suggestions will already be taught but if they are not related explicitly to students' perceptions of the period then they will not affect or change those perceptions.

The Norman Conquest

Both Harold and William probably had a range of motives for seeking the English crown but historians do stress that each man did believe he had a right to be king. Therefore they acted on principles, not only ambition.

The military events of 1066 show the complexity and effectiveness of the military planning on all sides. (This is echoed later during, for example, The Hundred Years War including the Agincourt campaign).

The efficiency of English government was apparent before 1066 in tax collecting, the issuing of writs sending instructions around the country and the complexity of laws. It also paved the way for the process of collecting the information collated in Domesday Book.

William wanted to avoid provoking rebellion so did not simply hand English lands en masse to his followers straightaway after becoming king.

The significant reduction in slavery after the Conquest and in the numbers of noblemen executed (though they did suffer other savage punishments).

John and Magna Carta

It took a long time for the baronial opposition to challenge John, suggesting the importance of loyalty to the anointed king. (The same point can be made in relation to Edward II, Richard II and Henry VI)

Negotiations leading to Magna Carta were complex and lasted approximately 3 weeks, building on a series of earlier documents and discussions.

The range and number of issues covered in the agreement is extensive, including the concern for fair government.

Some clauses dealt with issues so fundamental that they remained important for centuries and some are still important today

The Black Death and continuing outbreaks of plague

‘the main impression is of a civilized and organized society doing its best ... in desperately difficult circumstances.’

Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain 850-1520* (2002)

People tried all possible methods of cure and prevention within their world view

Neighbours visited the sick, mourned the dead, comforted the bereaved and looked after orphans.

Wills were made and bequests carried out. Bodies were buried in an orderly, dignified manner even if in trenches rather than single graves.

Society kept functioning in the face of a human crisis impossible to imagine.

Public health improvements were made by local government and by individuals who left money in wills to improve, for example, supplies of fresh water, improve roads, take away

The Great Revolt, 1381

The rebels were very knowledgeable about national politics and events and were led by men who were used to exercising responsibility in their localities

There were high expectations of government, that taxes be spent effectively and that lords had a responsibility to the commons

This was not a one-off event but built on earlier more localised protests and many of its features were repeated in Cade's rebellion in 1450.

The rebels were well-organised, using the local defence system set up against invasion.

There was still a strong wish to obey the king, hence their belief in Richard II's promises of meeting their demands.

The Wars of the Roses

Despite the outbreaks of warfare there was widespread desire to avoid civil war and maintain peace, exemplified by the Act of Accord in 1460.

Lasting loyalty was shown to Henry VI despite his long-term inadequacy as king and loss of lands in France

Queens and noblewomen acted effectively as intermediaries to keep the peace and in running estates while lords were absent on political and military business.

Destruction by armies was rare during the periods of warfare

Those killed in battle were mourned by families and friends.

The depositions of Henry VI and Edward V were opposed on moral grounds – some people were prepared to put morality before personal interests.

Overall Conclusions

Some final thoughts to pull all this together:

- Choice of detail affects students' perceptions of a period (even though this will be implicit) and may well cement pre-existing and misleading negative perceptions of the Middle Ages.
- To achieve balanced coverage of the Middle Ages schemes of work need to be audited to identify the likely impact of details on students' perceptions of the period and ensure balanced coverage.

More generally, a classroom diet of History that presents an entirely or almost entirely negative portrayal of the people of the past is bad for students. It undermines their faith in human nature and builds cynicism about individual people, governments and humanity's capacity to care for others.

As I wrote in *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History*

'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.'

Links to related material

My own version of the 'mystery' of the Princes

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/PrincesintheTower.html>

An exploration of what has and hasn't been learned from the discovery of Richard III's skeleton

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/DiscoveringRichard3.html>

Other articles on planning teaching about the Middle Ages with Y7

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

Classroom resources being developed to fit the approach outlined in this article

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