Sitting on Cats: Helping students recognise that people in the Middle Ages were as real as us.

This is Discussion 2 in a series laying the groundwork for the later stages of this ETMH project. It can be read in conjunction with 'Were medieval people ever kind? Why teach about attitudes and emotions?' in the HA publication *Exploring and Teaching Medieval History* HERE …

And download this discussion as a PDF HERE …

The importance of 'sitting on cats'

The first materials I will be writing for this ETMH project have draft titles which ask students:

> Do you think you'd have liked Margaret Paston?
>
> Can you recognise the emotions and feelings of these people in the Middle Ages?
>
> What really mattered to X?
>
> Could X's life have been different?

The first thing you'll probably notice about these titles is that they're not about events but about people. This is because I believe it's important to shift the balance away from studying events to studying people and their roles in events. For all that History is fundamentally a study of people, school courses on the Middle Ages tend to be dominated by events, the people rarely more than an abstract and constantly changing catalogue of names. It's very hard for students, whether at KS3 or A level, to see behind those names to the personalities and characters of individuals.

This, I think, has several repercussions:

> - it reduces some students' interest in history – people are generally more interesting than 'events', especially if they have no apparent link to students' own lives today.
>
> - it makes understanding the period itself harder – students may 'know' about events but to understand a period we really need to understand what's going on in people's minds.

> - for all the analysis of causation and motivation in preparation for assessment, it seems unlikely that students learn anything that helps them develop their understanding of human behaviour, either then or now. This seems a huge missed opportunity for history lessons to contribute to students' building a sense of their own identity through exploring the complexity, uncertainties, inconsistency, ideals and capacity for good or ill of their fellow human beings in the past.

If students are to appreciate that the people they hear about in the Middle Ages were 'real people' with much in common with ourselves (and so move towards deepening their understanding of their fellow human beings and of themselves) then the first necessary stage must be for students to experience one or more 'sitting on cats' moments!

Sitting on cats? I'll let Sir Maurice Powicke, one of the most eminent medievalists of the twentieth century, explain:

> '… sometimes as I work at a series of patent and close rolls, I have a queer sensation; the dead entries begin to be alive. It is rather like the experience of sitting down in one's chair and finding that one has sat on the cat. These are real people.'
>
> F.M. Powicke, *Ways of Medieval Life and Thought*, (London, 1950) page 67.

As history teachers we often experience such 'cat sitting' moments – in places where we 'know' the people who once lived there, when handling artefacts created centuries ago or when looking at documents we know were written by someone on a particular day for a particular reason. Earlier this year, standing by the river in King's Lynn, I recalled how Henry IV and his family had spent a week there in 1406, saying farewell to his daughter Philippa who was embarking for Denmark where she was to become Queen. Henry must have known it was unlikely that he would see Philippa again. That poor cat must have felt thoroughly squashed as I looked down the river and out towards the sea, imagining the varied feelings of all those in King's Lynn that week over 600 years ago.

For students in schools, recognising that the people they are studying were once as real as themselves seems essential, the very heart of history, but do we deliberately create and give

students those chances to experience such ‘sitting on cats’ moments? This seems too important to leave to happenstance – but how can we help students have these ‘flares of recognition’ about the people in the Middle Ages? At the moment I have those four ideas listed above to develop:

1. Do you think you’d have liked Margaret Paston?

I’m planning to start with this question because it links to one of the most basic reactions we all have (and which students will already have plenty of experience of) - that sense of liking or disliking people on sight and then confirming or changing our minds, depending on circumstances. This isn’t an objective, ‘serious’ historical enquiry but a deliberately subjective one lesson start – if we want to help students recognise common humanity then being subjective is important. The Pastons (not just Margaret but several others) are ideal to introduce because we know so much about them and they can be seen as many-sided individuals.

2. Can you recognise the emotions and feelings of these people in the Middle Ages?

This builds on the first stage, by looking more widely at examples of a range of emotions and feelings. I am collecting a range of examples of people’s words, actions and behaviour – can students identify the feelings or emotions in each one? One of the initial conclusions from Jason Todd’s research into students’ preconceptions is that many students do not see people in the Middle Ages as having the same range of emotions as themselves, so this may help to challenge such ideas, leading towards an understanding of this quotation from Professor Miri Rubin in her book T*he Middle Ages, A Very Short Introduction*:

> ‘It is often assumed that people of this period were vastly different from us. This is not a helpful assumption. Then, as now, individuals aimed to live the best lives possible while struggling to make ends meet, fulfilling the expectations of institutions, and trying to satisfy some of their desires …. Our sources – ranging from wills to poetry, from visual imagery to testimonies in courts of law – show individuals from across the social spectrum displaying emotions familiar to us: loyalty, jealousy, greed, hope, and passionate love.’

One of the problems here will be also identifying differences as well as similarities, perhaps by focussing on differences in experiences, for example the vast amount of time and effort needed to fetch water for each household every day (at least 20 litres per head each day seems likely) and to

collect fuel for fires. And there's this, from Professor Robin Fleming's *Britain after Rome: the fall and rise 400-1070*:

> 'Although adults buried in medieval cemeteries were as tall, on average, as mid-twentieth-century Britons, their anaemic, parasite-ridden children were not. One year olds at Raunds [an excavated burial site] were the same size as modern babies, but by early adolescence lagged behind twentieth-century children by as much as four years. The same is true for Wharram Percy. Fourteen year-olds there were the same height as modern 10 year-olds. Still, undersize children grew to their more or less genetically programmed heights in the Middle Ages; it just took them longer. Modern children finish growing at about 18, but in the nineteenth century, a period for which we have good data, we know that the working classes continued to grow, on average, until the age of 29, and it looks as if something similar was taking place among medieval populations.'

I suspect I will need to broaden this to emotions, feelings and experiences – while still keeping to one (possibly two) lessons' worth of material.

3. What ideas really mattered to X?

This is moving on from recognisable emotions and feelings to ideas that may be harder for students to understand e.g. what kinds of beliefs, ideals and principles influenced choices and actions? This is very much part of developing students' sense of period - students need to understand these ideas if they are to explain individuals' actions effectively. This could be done via the life of an individual such as Geoffrey Luttrell or more generally (or both if I find time).

Again many students' preconceptions will be that people (especially kings and nobles) were motivated solely by power, ambition and wealth, not by principles and ideas or loyalty or the desire to do good. Such preconceptions need to be challenged, opening up other possibilities, BEFORE students look at any individual events – otherwise their preconceptions may lead to them taking away examples from e.g. the events of 1066 which simply shore up negative preconceptions.

4. Could X's life have been different?

I haven't got a subject for this yet but this question or something similar seems an essential element if students are to learn more about human complexity and behaviour, perhaps including the

paradoxes of making choices which go against the principles an individual believes in. This could tackle questions such as:

> How multi-faceted was X's life?
>
> What were the major influences on X's life?
>
> How might X have looked back on his/her life? How might it have been different?
>
> Why did X choose to do …. instead of …… and why might this have been a difficult, uncertain choice?
>
> How typical was X's life compared with others at the time?

By way of conclusion

This feels exciting. It also feels heretical because I believe it's important to introduce items 1 to 3 above before starting to teach about 1066. This goes against the grain of many schemes of work! However, heresy or not, I hope to have at least some of these resources developed by the summer of 2019. In the meantime, I highly recommend an article by Jason Todd and Katharine Burn which explores the importance of thinking about why History matters to young people and, for example, how history can contribute to students' sense of their own identity. You can find the article and links to related material HERE …