



Teacher Fellowship Programme

Local history: untold stories of the people of Britain

What should we write next to this painting?

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Image:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bryan_Blundell_1.jpg

This local study involves contested history. Year 8 students engage with debates about the memorialisation of those involved with the transatlantic slave trade. The enquiry is framed around a piece of cultural legacy from the Georgian era – a painting to commemorate the philanthropy of a local merchant. At the time that this enquiry was developed, there was considerable debate locally about whether the individual concerned was or was not directly involved in the trade of enslaved Africans. Members of our history department worked with a team of sixth-formers and local organisations to investigate the available evidence. We found compelling evidence that, for all his philanthropic work, he was indeed substantially involved in transatlantic slavery. This Year 8 study arose following that research, with Key Stage 3 students investigating for themselves the complexities of the history of that individual and concluding by writing their own interpretation of his story. In the end, the students' work was actually placed on display alongside the painting, enabling the students to make a very real contribution to public understanding of the past.

Before focusing in on this local case study, students completed a sequence of lessons exploring the national and international nature and impact of transatlantic trade, including the trade in enslaved Africans.

Rationale

Our existing unit on the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans already included an element of local history, but we wanted to develop it further.

Our school is in Liverpool, a city that was just a small settlement until the late seventeenth century, when it began to develop rapidly in conjunction with new opportunities for colonial trade in the Americas. Liverpool merchants profited from investments in transatlantic trade, including the sale of sugar, tobacco and enslaved people from Africa. Our previous lessons included an activity where students learned about streets in the city that were named after merchants who participated in the transatlantic slave trade. There was also a classroom debate about whether it was right for the city to have apologised for its role in the trade in enslaved Africans.

We wanted to redevelop this unit for a number of reasons:

- There was considerable scope for a deeper level of historical investigation. We felt that students should go beyond simply learning the names of merchants and associated streets and try to discover more about actual people, their lives and the impact of their actions.
- We needed to update the precise focus of the debate lesson. It was now many years since the city council's formal apology was given, and that issue was no longer a common topic of debate in the city. Instead, it would be more relevant for our students to connect to the debates in the city that had arisen around the Black Lives Matter movement.
- We had an opportunity for very local history in our own school. The school can trace its own origins back to 1708, and the school owns a painting of one of its founders, Bryan Blundell, a man whose own history is a contested one.

Aims

We felt that this study had many potential benefits:

- First and foremost, students could gain an insight into the way in which different interpretations of historical figures and events might be arrived at, and how access to different documentary sources might affect the final conclusions drawn. We wanted them to gain a deeper understanding of history as a creative process, rather than something where the definitive story comes ready-made in a textbook.
- We believed that exploring the story of this one individual would naturally lead students to find out about how and when their hometown grew from a small port, trading largely with Ireland, to a metropolis with powerful links to other continents.
- We believed that students could develop a more complex understanding of different dimensions of the historical story. As they learned about economic and cultural developments in their own city, they would also be able to see the endemic connections with slavery that generated the funds to pay for such progress. Similarly, they could learn about complexities in social history: how the growth of an urban centre with a huge increase in population was accompanied by poverty and destitution; how it also created a new class of newly monied merchants who would ape the traditional aristocracy by donating to philanthropic ventures; and how this led to them having a positive impact on the lives of some individuals while being involved in the exploitation and oppression of others.

Planning

The approach to contested history taken in our enquiry was designed to reflect the approach being adopted by the wider community. There had been some suggestions that the city should rename locations named after individuals involved in the trade in enslaved Africans. However, the council had decided not to erase these controversial traces of the past but instead to create a series of plaques recognising and explaining the connections between these city landmarks and the transatlantic trade in enslaved people. We saw a real value for our students in designing an enquiry that they could see being mirrored in the world outside. We also believed that the fact that our final student-devised texts would be going up on public display next to the painting would provide the students with a greater sense of purpose and importance for their work.

Framing our local study around one contested individual also seemed to offer advantages in terms of engagement. It would provide a human scale to the story of the town. Rather than just looking at maps and images of what the town looked like in 1720, it seemed more engaging to be able to talk of the streets that Blundell walked down and the sights that this real person would once have seen.

We deliberately sequenced the lessons in such a way that it would allow students to build up different layers of understanding. We chose to present the information at two discrete times, so as to create an opportunity for students to be truly swayed by the material that they uncovered and to emerge with an understanding of how different attitudes to contested histories might arise: how someone who had only seen the portrait and the evidence of Blundell's philanthropic work might feel defensive about his reputation, for example, while someone who also had additional access to the recently discovered evidence of his multi-layered involvement in slavery would likely have a powerfully different view.

In terms of resources, where possible, we chose to give students access to substantive documentary evidence. With access to large printed maps, a full-scale portrait and texts longer than a paragraph, it gave students more freedom to explore, to spot patterns, to raise questions and, ultimately, to reach more independent conclusions.

Summary of lessons

	Lesson focus and learning objectives	Learning activities	Resources for the lesson
1	<p><i>What does the evidence in our school suggest about Bryan Blundell?</i></p> <p>To form an initial impression of Bryan Blundell and how he wished to be remembered.</p>	<p>Students take part in on-site research to study items in school that commemorate Bryan Blundell, including contemporary portraits of both him and his son.</p> <p>On return to the classroom, they discuss and add to their notes regarding the content and provenance of these items and what could be inferred about the motivations behind their creation.</p> <p>Students note initial conclusions about Bryan Blundell, based only on the evidence encountered during this lesson.</p>	<p>PowerPoint to guide discussion in class</p> <p>Physical resources in school:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • portraits of Bryan Blundell • portrait of his son Jonathon Blundell • memorial stones for both Blundells • family Bible belonging to Jonathon Blundell (photographs in PowerPoint)
2	<p><i>What was Liverpool like when Blundell was young?</i></p> <p>To put Bryan Blundell into context and form an initial impression of the town of Liverpool before the expansion of transatlantic trade. This investigation should include not just the physical extent of the town, but also social insights into the values of its citizens.</p>	<p>Students investigate historical maps to examine the size and nature of Liverpool in the seventeenth century.</p> <p>Students also investigate entries from the town books that provide information about life in Liverpool at this time.</p> <p>Students note conclusions about the nature of Liverpool in the late seventeenth century.</p>	<p>PowerPoint to guide discussion in class</p> <p>Hard copies of maps and other documentary evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • drawing of Liverpool in 1650 from William Ashton's 1920 book <i>Evolution of a Coastline</i> • Thomas Kaye's map of Liverpool in 1650 – from his 1833 book <i>The Stranger in Liverpool</i> • map produced by Allot Jones in 1930 showing an overlay of the historic 'pool' of Liverpool upon a map of the twentieth-century city centre • excerpts from <i>The Rise and Progress of Liverpool</i>, by James Touzeau, a history of the town written in 1910, using the record books of the town council to tell the story of the town from 1551 to 1835
3	<p><i>How did the increase in trade change Liverpool?</i></p>	<p>Students investigate historical maps and text-based sources of information to examine rapid changes to Liverpool in the eighteenth century, before drawing their own conclusions about this.</p>	<p>PowerPoint to guide discussion in class</p> <p>Maps and sources showing the changes in Liverpool:</p>

	To investigate how the town of Liverpool changed in conjunction with the expansion of transatlantic trade.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thomas Kaye's map of Liverpool in 1650 – from his 1833 book <i>The Stranger in Liverpool</i> • John Eyes' map of Liverpool in 1765, published in 1768 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gregory's map of Liverpool in 1806 • John Gore's map of Liverpool in 1817 • selection of sources on social changes within Liverpool, including an excerpt from Daniel Defoe's 1724 <i>A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain</i>
4	<p><i>What can we learn about the Blundells and our school?</i></p> <p>To investigate the case study of Bryan Blundell and his sons and how they contributed to the creation of The Blue Coat Hospital School and other philanthropic causes.</p>	<p>Students use primary sources to engage in a guided investigation of the development of The Blue Coat Hospital School and the contributions made by Bryan Blundell.</p> <p>Students note conclusions about Bryan Blundell, based on his philanthropic work.</p>	<p>PowerPoint to guide investigation</p> <p>Hard copy of extended extract from Blundell's account of the early years of The Hospital School</p> <p>A narrative of the rise and progress of the Charity School, or Blue Coat Hospital, made by Mr Bryan Blundell, Treasurer, from the year 1709, to near the time of his death in 1755</p>
5	<p><i>Has there been a hidden history?</i></p> <p>To investigate other documents that have not previously been as well publicised, which reveal the extent of the Blundell family's involvement in the slavery-based element of the transatlantic economy.</p>	<p>Supported by teacher explanation of the PowerPoint, students use primary sources to find out more about other aspects of the Blundell story, including the wider context of other merchants in Liverpool.</p>	<p>PowerPoint to guide discussion in class</p> <p>Hard copies of documentary evidence, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • excerpt from <i>The Journal of Bryan Blundell</i> (1756) • 1739 letter from the traders to Africa to the King, requesting military protection for vessels involved in the trade in enslaved Africans, following the outbreak of war with Spain • 1752 list of Liverpool members of the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa (which had replaced the functions formally held by the Royal Africa Company in facilitating West African trade in enslaved people) • data available from the international database www.slavevoyages.org

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • excerpt from the baptism records of St Peter's Church, Liverpool, 1767 • 1773 advert in <i>Williamson's Liverpool Advertiser</i> for an escaped slave in Liverpool • 1794 advert in the <i>Royal Gazette of Jamaica</i> for the slave-trading firm Rainford, Blundell and Rainford
6	<p><i>What interpretation should we offer now?</i></p> <p>Students create their own historical interpretation of how Bryan Blundell should be remembered.</p>	<p>Teacher provides overview of historiography of Blundell – students discuss in the light of their own research.</p> <p>Students consider all their research, and select an appropriate method to retell their own history of Bryan Blundell.</p>	<p>PowerPoint to guide discussion in class</p> <p>Guidance document to suggest format for students writing their own interpretation</p> <p>Students' own notes and handouts from previous lessons</p>

Reflections

The enquiry proved engaging and successful for many reasons. Students felt a personal connection to an investigation that was not just about the growth of their town, but also about the foundation of their very own school. Contemporary media coverage had made them aware that this was clearly a topic about which their local community felt strongly too. There was also a real sense that they were operating on the 'cutting edge' of historical research. There were no textbooks that had already been written on this topic, and the students knew that they were accessing recently discovered documents that were not widely known in the local community.

The framing proved effective too. The tight focus on the period of one man's lifetime made this topic much easier to grasp than attempting to assess impact on a whole city over three centuries. It also worked effectively as a vehicle with which to introduce important yet less initially captivating factors. For example, students left the unit with a good understanding of how the world's first commercially successful 'wet dock' transformed the city's fortunes, but a unit that led with this issue would surely not have engaged the students anywhere near as much.

The unit proved very effective in changing the lens through which students saw their city. They now saw it more clearly as an outward-looking international port city, whose links to other continents have been in place for centuries. Some students also clearly gained a sense of pride that theirs was a community that faced up to controversial aspects of its past and neither denied them nor eliminated them once uncovered.

It also provided us all with a better chronological understanding. Many textbooks bundle the transatlantic slave trade in with the Industrial Revolution of 1750–1900, and yet nearly all of Blundell's long lifetime profiting from the trade in enslaved people came before 1750. An unexpected consequence of this enquiry came in our next unit, when students considered the origins of the finance that enabled the Industrial Revolution.

Although the detailed content is specific to one individual and location, there were many aspects of this enquiry that should be easily transferable to other schools:

- We thought carefully about what would be meaningfully 'local' to the students. Many of our students arrive and leave the school site by bus and never spend time in the area surrounding the school. We felt that we had to choose either the entire city as a location or something connected to the school itself.
- We made an effort to place the individual in context – to help the students to understand how the values of the time could be different to their own. Finding excerpts from the town books, with their illustrations of a time when ringed pigs roamed the streets, people were fined for failing to attend church and 40-hour ale-house lock-ins occurred enabled students to see familiar streets through a different lens.
- Spending the first lesson leaving the classroom to take notes on an aspect of the physical environment made it feel different to a normal lesson enquiry from the very start.
- We really wanted the students to replicate the creative element of the historical process. Each lesson ended with them drawing their own conclusions based on the evidence that they had seen so far, and the whole unit concluded with them getting to construct a new history themselves. This more open-ended approach seemed more engaging than other enquiries based around a closed set of options. Essentially, we were asking students 'If you were to write the history of Blundell, what story would you feel is important to tell?', whereas once we might have asked 'Do you think that Blundell was a hero or a villain?'

- Having an established interpretation to argue against, the ‘plot twist’ of the revelation of new evidence and having some kind of external intended audience all combined to great effect to engage and motivate the students, and we would certainly recommend all these elements for other enquiries.

In terms of planning and resourcing the unit, a vital part of our strategy was to approach it as a two-phase project. Firstly, we acted as historian-researchers ourselves, only later developing a Key Stage 3 enquiry based on that experience. Working with the team of Year 12s was a rewarding and enjoyable experience for staff and had a major impact on the Year 12s themselves – with several referring to it in university applications. Within our research phase, it was absolutely crucial that we reached out to and worked with local organisations, who were able to share their expertise and insights. We would certainly recommend that other history teachers look to collaborate with local organisations who might share a connection with or interest in the topic to be studied in class. We would also certainly stress the importance of seeking out local historians – in our case, Laurence Westgaph, who provided us with information about the documentary evidence available of Blundell’s involvement in the trade in enslaved Africans. Something else that we learned along the way was the importance of looking further afield to find information about our local area. We found evidence about our local businessmen in the National Archives online, and we also benefitted from studying the work of local historians based in Chesapeake Bay. This not only helped us to understand the nature of the colonial experience but also enabled us to find records of the Blundell family’s American investments that we hadn’t found in documents closer to home.

We recognise that not all schools will have such a close connection to a particular individual. Nevertheless, the endemic connections to transatlantic slavery across Hanoverian Britain should mean that many different localities could facilitate a similar enquiry based around a local figure. The fundamental structure of the enquiry outlined above should also be applicable to many other kinds of contested history from many different eras, particularly where there has been some kind of public display or civic commemoration associated with a particular interpretation of someone whose history might bear closer examination – whether that be a painting, a statue or the naming of a street, park or building.

Recommended resources

We would recommend resources similar to those below for teachers considering undertaking a similar project:

www.slavevoyages.org

This website offers the largest publicly available database of records of voyages involved in the trade in enslaved Africans. The database has been compiled collaboratively over many years by academics, and can provide high levels of detail of individual voyages, including names of investors, the dates of voyages, ports visited, the number of enslaved people taken aboard and how many died en route to the Americas.

www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/international-slavery-museum

The website of the International Slavery Museum always offers a rich range of educational opportunities. There is so much to learn here about the topic of slavery and its legacy, right through to the present day, including case studies of artefacts and updates regarding ongoing research into the study of slavery.

Liverpool and Slavery Facebook group (www.facebook.com/groups/1941789819395511)

This is an example of the kind of local research community that exists. In this case, there are constant updates on the hidden histories in the physical environment of the city, and the work being done to raise awareness of that history.

www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/slavery-histories

This is a new initiative that was announced at the same time as we were working on our project, whereby the city council has committed to make public the connections between city locations and the transatlantic trade in enslaved people.

<https://mybluecoat.org.uk/home>

This is the website of the Blue Coat Arts Centre, which had received lottery funding to research and tell the story of the era that we were looking to study. It provided us with access to archive materials and a first link to some of the people from the Arts Centre, who were to be so helpful in developing our own research. This is a great example of the kind of collaboration that teachers can find in their local community.

Local history texts

In our case, we found *The Rise and Progress of Liverpool from 1551 to 1835*, written by James Touzeau in 1910, to be of particular help. This fascinating and thorough work not only provided us with thematic coverage of the period that we were researching, but also contained within it many excerpts from primary sources that we found to be of great use when designing lesson material.