

HA NEWS

Spring 2026

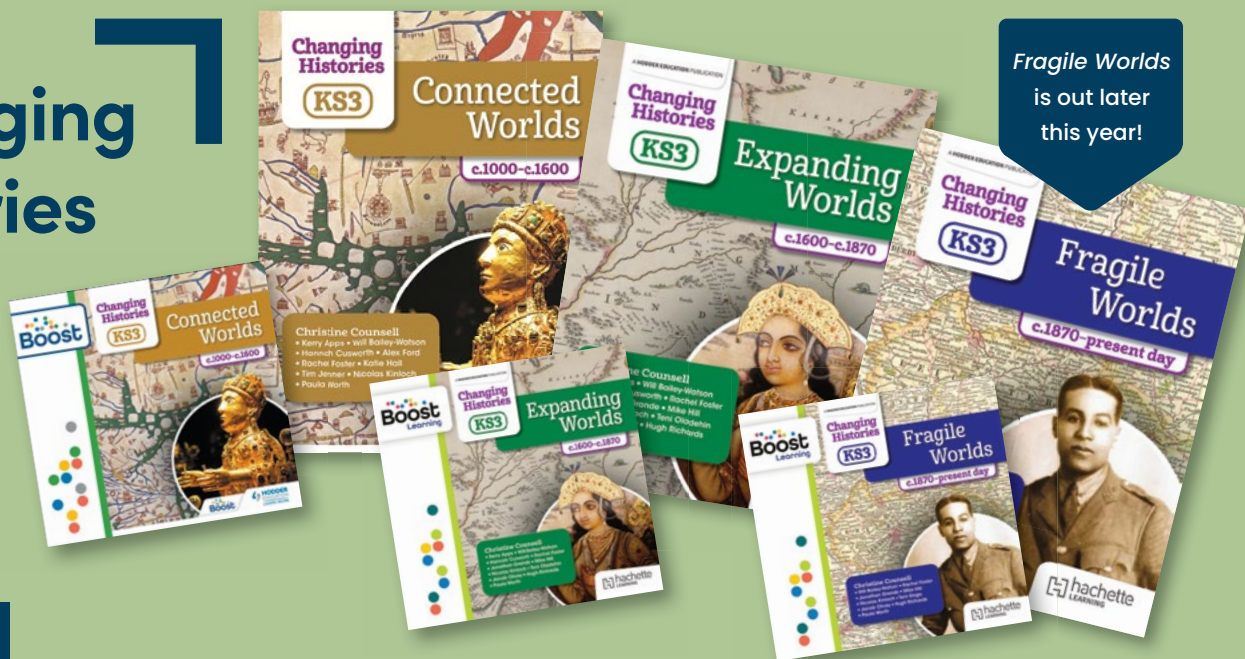
News, events and branches: the
membership magazine of the
Historical Association



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Historical Association

The voice for history

The Historical Association is an independent charity incorporated by Royal Charter. The HA was established to advance the study and teaching of history and brings together all those who share an interest in and love for the past. We depend on membership for our core income and to ensure the education of young people and fight for their right to an historical education. Your membership also allows us to continue to support continuing professional development for teachers and helps support our branches, whose lively programme of events brings great history to anyone who wishes to become involved.

Our core activities are funded by your membership. Membership is open to all and subscribing to one of our journals not only furthers your love of history but also helps us reach a wider audience.

Journals

History

Editor: Dr Jayne Gifford. Published in partnership with Wiley

The Historian

Editorial Board: Jenni Hyde, Steven Illingworth, Ian Armour, Tom Hamilton, Rosalind Crone, Natasha Brockman, Joe Saunders, Nicola Clarke, Nigel Davies and Matthew Martin

Teaching History

Editors: Katharine Burn, Christine Counsell, Mary Woolley and Elizabeth Carrl

Primary History

Editors: Karin Doull, Tim Lomas, Paul Bracey, Helen Crawford, Polly Gillow, Kate Rigby, Ailsa Fidler, Rachel Bruce, Salma Begum, James Bowen, Jo McWhinney-Tripp and Damienne Clarke

The HA is a charity and we rely on our membership fees to fund all the activities that we deliver, and we also need our membership to support us as volunteers through our branches, publications and committees. We currently have vacancies on our *Historian* editorial board and local branches are often looking for support. If you are interested in this, please visit our website to see how you can get involved.

www.history.org.uk/go/supportus

Staff contacts

Historical Association
59a Kennington Park Road
London SE11 4JH

Tel: 0300 100 0223
Email: enquiry@history.org.uk

CEO:

Rebecca Sullivan

E: rebecca.sullivan@history.org.uk

Education & CPD:

Melanie Jones

E: melaniej@history.org.uk

Events and CPD:

**Maheema Chanrai
and Olivia Dent**

E: maheema.chanrai@history.org.uk

E: olivia.dent@history.org.uk

Membership:

**Emily Randall,
David Lewzey
and Jen Henshaw**

E: membership@history.org.uk

Public engagement and outreach:

Paula Kitching

E: paula.kitching@history.org.uk

Team administrator and

Public engagement:

Clara Cook

E: clara.cook@history.org.uk

Publications and advertising:

Martin Hoare

E: martin.hoare@history.org.uk

Website and online resources:

Harvey Edser

E: harvey.edser@history.org.uk

Finance:

Rosemarie Koroma

E: Rosemarie.Koroma@history.org.uk

Branches:

Suzannah Stern

E: suzannah.stern@history.org.uk

Welcome to the first online edition of *HA News*

This is the first stage of a digital version. As you can tell, it is not especially sophisticated yet but we hope this will improve with each edition and the new website that is currently in development. This is also a reduced-size edition as there will be two more editions this year – another short version in the summer and a longer, more typical-size version for the autumn.

We have gone over to a digital version to save on printing and distribution costs and to move to a more sustainable and environmentally friendly position. As we are still getting to grips with how we create this new version, we are happy for feedback. This time round I have collected some stories from our website, created some new content in line with the previous print editions, and collated a couple of articles from our extensive resource collections – hopefully you should be able to link through to those articles.

The reason for the three editions is to try out the different styles and to reach a new timetable for *HA News*. After 2026 we will be back to two editions each year, the first in June and the second in late November. Feedback on all the changes is welcome, so do get in touch with me with your thoughts.

As always, we have a busy year ahead with lots of things planned. The education team are providing the usual, unusual and extremely innovative and timely range of courses, CPD and resources for all things educational.

The events, webinars and short courses for our General/Historian members are reflecting the usual mix of broad, topical and random to provide interest for the broad church that is our membership. In fact, hot off the press (digital keyboard) I can confirm that to mark the historic display of the Bayeux Tapestry in London and the upcoming 2027 Year of the Normans, the next HA short course starting in the autumn of 2026 will be 'The Norman World'. We have five outstanding academics to deliver the course so watch out for announcements.

Before then we have annual Conference, our AGM and Medlicott lecture evening. As well as lots of competitions, Virtual Branch events, regional branch events and a new website to finish. And because we do all of this and reach so many of you, we hope you will agree with the Department for Education's decision to entrust us and our carefully selected team of educationalists to be the drafters of the history curriculum for schools. I think our innovation, expertise and diversity are inherent in all that we do and deliver – and we are not averse to a bit of constructive criticism, it all helps us to learn and develop for our membership needs. Never shying away from a challenge and having the confidence to lead, not just respond have been key to ensuring the HA's survival for over 100 years while going from strength to strength. Long may it continue even with digital challenges.

Paula – *HA News* editor

Historical Association
59a Kennington Park Road
London SE11 4JH
Telephone: 0300 100 0223

PRESIDENT – Professor Alex Walsham
DEPUTY PRESIDENT – Dr Michael Maddison
HONORARY TREASURER – Richard Walker
HONORARY SECRETARY – Dr Katharine Burn
CHIEF EXECUTIVE – Rebecca Sullivan

EDITOR – Paula Kitching
Paula.Kitching@history.org.uk

DESIGN AND LAYOUT –
Paula Kitching and Martin Hoare
martin.hoare@history.org.uk

PUBLISHER – Rebecca Sullivan

Contact us c/o Historical Association
59a Kennington Park Road, London SE11 4JH
or email us at: publications@history.org.uk

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Spring is in the air along with a strong whiff of change. The (National) Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) panel published their recommendations in the late autumn followed by the government's response. The keynote for the National Curriculum for history was very much 'evolution not revolution'. The Department for Education put out a tender for people/organisations to draft the new curriculum and post-14 subject criteria. The Historical Association, along with some other subject associations, tendered for their subject areas. And, for first time in the 100 plus years that most subject associations have been supporting teachers, it is good to see their involvement with the drafting following the recommendations from CAR and from the Secretary of State for Education. It is also tough! Subject associations are all charities, largely have a small core staff and rely on external expertise to help their work – very often as volunteers but, when possible, as (badly) paid consultants. Working to the tight constraints of the guidance and against tight deadlines poses a number of challenges. However, notwithstanding these challenges it is good to see subjects sitting at the centre of this work.

Another change will be a sad one as Professor Alexandra Walsham nears the end of her three-year term as president of the Historical Association. It has been a real privilege to work with Alex over the past years and to get to know her. Together with Mike Maddison as our deputy president, Alex has worked with us to begin to bring in better support for the CEO and senior team at 59a which is much welcomed. My thanks to Alex and I am sorry to be saying goodbye to her as our president but glad to know she will remain on Governing Council helping the HA through the next few years as we head towards our 125th anniversary in 2031 (May 19th to be exact). Of course, I also get to welcome a new president in the guise of Professor James Daybell. I am excited to be working with James over the next few years and seeing where we take the HA next. You can watch our recent interview with James on the HA site.

Big changes are lurking in the cloud too, as our new website will be launched later this year. Simon Davis and Harvey Edser, with support and advice from other members of the staff, trustees and committee members, have been giving the HA website a major overhaul. Hopefully you will find it much easier to navigate the new site and with the updated My HA area you can not only file all the HA resources you want to get at easily but can also share files with others. If you would like to help us test the new site or help create some sample My HA folders, please do get in touch.

Reading this column, you will naturally have spotted another big change: *HA News* has gone digital. I hope you are enjoying the new online magazine. Finding the right balance between paper and online resources can be tricky and there is, increasingly, the concern to ensure we are responsible and sustainable in our approach the world's resources. Of course, we are still finding our way with some of this so I hope you can be patient with us. We hope that with *HA News* now online, along with the journal *History* and our other publications available as either print or digital, we are moving towards a good balance.

Looking forward, even for an historical association is important - knowing how to balance those two positions is how we have survived and thrived for over a century, and how we should be able to keep being relevant well into the future.

Rebecca Sullivan



This is my final newsletter as president of the Historical Association! The past three years have flown by at seemingly high speed and it is hard to believe that my term of office is nearly over. I am delighted to announce my successor, James Daybell, Professor of History and Associate Dean of the University of Plymouth, who will be formally inducted as president at the AGM in May. James is an historian of early modern England and his research has ranged widely across multiple topics and themes, from women's letter writing and the family to the history of material culture, including the humble but fascinating piece of clothing that is the glove – the subject of his most recent book. He has extensive experience in public history and forms of outreach and has worked closely with museums, archives, and heritage organisations in Britain and further afield. As I prepare to hand over, I know that the HA is in excellent hands and that James will help to steer the ship into safe waters in a time of so much challenge and change – political, social, financial and global.

I have enormously enjoyed my time as president. I have learnt so much from engaging with teachers, branch officers and members, the HA's Executive and Council, and the team at 59a headed by Becky Sullivan. I have tremendous admiration for all that HA does and for the extraordinary amount of generous and unstinting work undertaken by volunteers at all levels of the organisation. It has been a pleasure to be part of the History Quartet and to work alongside the Royal Historical Society, the Institute for Historical Research, and History UK to represent and support history as a subject and a discipline. Wearing my HA hat, I have also been a member of the British Academy's network of Learned Societies and contributed to debates about Open Access, the Research Excellence Framework, and government research funding via UKRI. I have sought to defend



and demonstrate the critical skills that history teaches and cultivates as we navigate the advance of AI and to defend the intrinsic value of the humanities in the face of institutional and cultural trends that question it.

The life of the president is a whirlwind of activity and I have traversed (almost) the length and breadth of Britain to visit branches – from Swansea, Exeter and Plymouth to Glasgow and Edinburgh, and from Bournemouth and Chichester to Lincoln, Nuneaton, and Sheffield, as well as locations across Greater London. I've navigated broken down buses and delayed and cancelled trains, but I've also had my first trip on a hovercraft and bounced my way across the Solent on a ferry. I'm grateful for all the arrangements made on my behalf, for the kind hospitality that has been extended during my visits, and for the interested and appreciative audiences who have asked such stimulating questions! It has been a privilege to help two branches celebrate the hundredth anniversaries of their foundation over the past year – the Isle of Wight and Bath – and I hope that many more will reach this milestone.

Other highlights for me have been the Annual Conference, always filled with inspiring talks and vibrant conversation, and judging the Great Debate. The quality of the finalists' speeches has been outstanding and I congratulate every one of them for their fantastic achievements. During my time as president, it has also been a delight to meet former students whom I taught and supervised in Exeter and Cambridge, who have entered the teaching profession and are now fostering a passion for history in the next generation.

I want to close by thanking everyone involved with the HA for making it such a great organisation, for flying the flag for our subject, and for living up to its mission to be The Voice for History. I'll continue to take a keen interest in its activities and to serve on Council. I remain available to deliver talks to branches, though it is now James's turn to get his running shoes on and prepare for the marathon!

Alexandra Walsham

Announcing a new HA President



We are delighted to announce that the new president of the Historical Association from the summer will be Professor James Daybell of Plymouth University. James has a long career as an historian of the early modern period but has also written extensively on other areas of history and related subjects. He is currently associate dean with responsibility of research at Plymouth and has many years of experience of presenting history in different public spaces as well as in the academic world.

Earlier this year we caught up with him for a chat on what got him into history and why he thinks the HA is so important. He explained to us that growing up in Hornsea in Yorkshire there was history all around him, in local landmarks, the castles and country houses and the nearest cities and towns such as York. His family also provided sources of interest with the personal stories of grandparents remembering their wartime experiences, and a grandmother who was able to bring to life the reality of the South West of England at the start of the twentieth century.

James studied history at Oxford and was lucky enough to have a broad course that allowed him to get a good feel across history subjects. It was there and at Reading University for his MA that we learn how his tutors influenced his choice in further historical study. Helping him to settle on his PHD subject area, which in turn opened the cultural lives of women and the importance and subtlety of communication – something that has stood him in good stead in his subsequent career.

James is the son of a headmaster and the husband of a teacher, which provides him with an enormous respect for the formal teaching profession, as well as a personal insight. He is keen to ensure that the HA continues to be the leading voice and support for history teachers at all levels of their career. He acknowledges that the task that teachers face to deliver the requirements of student knowledge is huge and yet they manage to do it time and time again. Faced with competing demands for students' attention, studying history can sometimes be pushed to one side by more media friendly vocational subjects led by STEM. He is keen to help the HA and its partner organisations get the message out that the important skills as well as the knowledge that studying history can develop is strongly communicated to pupils, parents and the wider public. He is also happy to stress the pleasure and benefit to well being that studying and or having access to historical knowledge can bring.

Throughout the interview it is clear that James is not just a hardworking academic but also a passionate advocate for the subject. As we find out in the interview the world of historical study nearly lost James to the dizzy excitement of accountancy, when he was snapped up after his first degree. Fortunately, for everyone it seems numbers and other people's tax could not hold him, as he yearned to return to the early modern era and the correspondence of that time. However, he later utilised those skills in making the books balance in his senior management roles at Plymouth University, especially when exploring how to write and manage research projects for university funding.

In his own career James has frequently stepped outside his own immediate specialisms and written books on wide areas of history. He was also one of the first professional historians to embrace the new technologies and communication tools for reaching new audiences with research-based history, by being one of the pioneers of the history podcast. Along with his colleague and friend Dr Sam Willis he started some of the 'in conversation' type podcasts which even resulted in a pre-Covid roadshow for the pair.

James is also familiar with the HA branches. After a few years based at a University in the United States, he returned with his family to settle in the Plymouth area. It was then that he contacted a local HA branch – establishing a relationship between university and branch that remains to this day. Therefore, he is undaunted by the idea that he might be invited to speak to all 45 HA branches during his time as President.

He will take up the post when Professor Alexandra Walsham steps down at the end of her three years as president. With everything that he has told us so far, we are looking forward to working with James over the next few years.

[link to the interview](#) An interview with Professor James Daybell / Historical Association

We would like to thank Professor Walsham for her commitment and for her guidance of the HA over the last few years. She has provided some of the most fascinating and illuminating of HA Conference keynotes as well as being a regular contributor to the talks out on by our branches. As is the case with all our former presidents we will continue to work with her in the future and wish her continued success in her own career.

MR WONG

Head of History

1 of 6,000 AQA history teachers

A photograph of Mr Wong, a man with glasses wearing a light pink shirt and a patterned tie, sitting at a desk and smiling towards the camera. In the background, two female students in school uniforms are seated at the same desk, looking down at their work. The scene is set in a classroom with a whiteboard visible in the background. A large pink diagonal graphic element is present in the upper left corner of the image.

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The Historical Association Annual Conference 2026

Newcastle and Gateshead

– 10 things to do

Planning on joining us for HA conference in Gateshead–Newcastle this year or just thinking about somewhere a bit different to visit? Well, here are some ideas for England’s most northerly city (that’s the Newcastle bit) – sorry Carlisle, Newcastle just pips it on the latitude. Maybe we should explain the difference between Newcastle and Gateshead. Just like the capital of Hungary, the two settlements emerged on either side of a great river – the Tyne. One side takes its name from the building of a new castle on the site of a previous Roman fort area, and one from a hill or headland where goats grazed: ‘Goats hill’ according to Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, although it was also the site of a Roman fort making it just as old as its neighbour. Historically, one side was considered Northumberland and the other was a part of County Durham. Unlike Budapest, which merged into one city with a name that combined the two original names, Newcastle and Gateshead remain separate, with different councils and administrative areas whose local officials often work together on joint projects and tourism activities but otherwise remain separate. Now, things to do:

1. If arriving by train - pop into the Centurion pub at the station – you don’t have to stay but do admire the original 1890s First Class waiting lounge, complete with tiled walls and rich furnishings. The lounge was converted into police cells for a while in the twentieth century, but following a few years of being boarded up its original beauty was restored providing a reminder of the days when rail travel was one of the most luxurious ways to get around.
2. Go to the actual Castle – it is not the Roman one, nor the Norman wooden one, from which the city takes its name, but it does have parts of the stone twentieth-century castle left and much of the refortified parts from during the English Civil War when it was on the side of the King.
3. The Cathedral – also with Norman origins from the twelfth century. Much of the building is medieval. It started out as a parish church, but modifications have still made it more impressive than many local churches, including the Lantern tower, which was used as a prison to hold Scottish prisoners in 1644 when the city was being besieged by the Scots and the mayor wanted to deter their forces from attacking the cathedral.
4. The Vampire Rabbit – it’s a local landmark. Our advice - just ask a local (a proper Geordie that is not a student or tourist) and ask for directions to the Vampire Rabbit. He lives near the Castle.
5. The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art. Housed in a converted flour mill, the art gallery serves as a reminder of how the area has changed but also how it can look forward with art.
6. The Glasshouse International Centre for Music, formally known as the Sage Music Centre. This purpose-designed curved building was built on the banks of the Tyne as part of the regeneration of the docks area in the 1990s and 2000s. Even if you don’t go inside to its impressive music spaces, look at the building from the outside and watch the light shine off the water – it is like watching a musical sound in light form.
7. The Tyne bridges – spanning the Tyne are an array of impressive bridges, there is the Swing Bridge which is on the site of the original Roman crossing, the recently established Millenium Bridge and the iconic Tyne Bridge. All are a testament to the region’s engineering heritage. *Tip: all the bridges can be seen quite clearly from the location of the HA conference!*



8. The Angel of the North is a contemporary sculpture designed by Anthony Gormley. It was completed in 1998 and can be seen as you drive along the A1 just as you approach Gateshead. It is 20 metres high, with a 54-metre wingspan – nearly the size of a jumbo jet. The whole structure weighs 200 tonnes and it has 20-metre foundations to keep it secure.
9. Grey's Monument and the Central Arcade – OK that's two things to see but they are really close to one another and it was difficult to choose. The 40-metre memorial was built in 1838 to commemorate Charles Grey (Earl Grey) and his role in the passing of the Great Reform Act of 1832 and the Abolition of Slavery. He is at the very top of the column if you can look that far, and just along Monument Street is the Edwardian-built central arcade – a celebration for the then new pastime of shopping for pleasure, with expensive looking shops and impressive mosaics – it feels like you have stepped back in time.
10. The Victoria Tunnel – built at the start of the nineteenth century to take coal underground from the collieries to the docks. It was designed to lead downwards so that filled carts of coal would be moved using their own weight towards the port area. Then wagons would then have to be hauled back towards the colliery using ropes – an impressive feat considering the length of the tunnel is 2.4 miles and reaches a depth of 85 feet. During the Second World War the tunnel was used as an air raid shelter – now it is open for visitors.

Of course, there are also museums and theatres to visit. And if you are happy to travel slightly further afield you can catch the metro out to the coast and visit North Shields and Whitley Bay. Much of the local landscape has the linguistic and physical remains of the rich history of the area from the Iron Age, Roman fortifications, the Anglo-Saxon period and Viking settlement, continuing right through the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries where the district played a vital role in fueling the industrial revolution.

Hadrian's Wall and the impressive Roman remains of Vindolanda – the rediscovered Roman fort – are a short drive away. And for those of you who like a mystery there are also lots of 'Vera' film locations to visit across the region.

And we haven't even mentioned sport – there are one or two sporting venues in the area with a bit of a pull.

Essentially, come to Newcastle and Gateshead for conference, and stay – not necessarily forever, but certainly enjoy a weekend, the Geordies are ever so friendly!

www.haconference.com



2026 is the year of reading –

and the Historical Association is celebrating it!

2026 has been announced as the year of reading, a timely reminder of the importance of literacy but also of the power of the written word.

Throughout recorded history, being able to read and write in some form has been an important method of communication, often used to control access to power and to widen access to society. The introduction of universal compulsory education at the end of the nineteenth century in the UK marked a turning point for society and attitudes to inclusion. In fact, the chronology of mankind can be pieced together using literary texts as much as by physical and environmental evidence.

While the need to read and write is essential in the modern era the practice of reading, to develop knowledge, to pursue research and study and for enjoyment, has not always been championed. In recent years we are told that reading for many people is no longer a pastime that they pursue – it is under threat from various forms of digital stimulus.



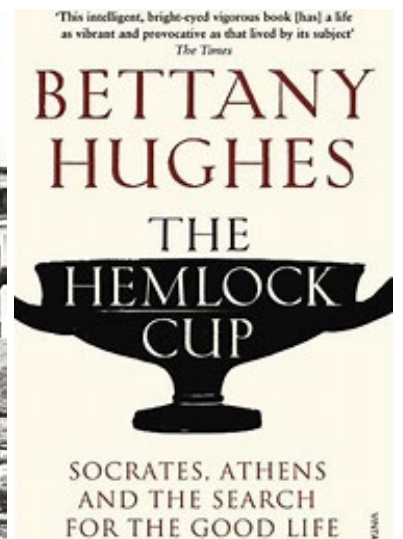
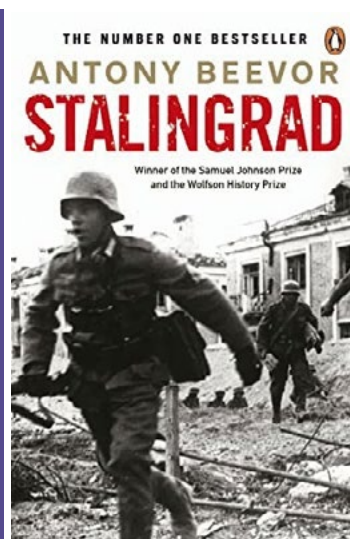
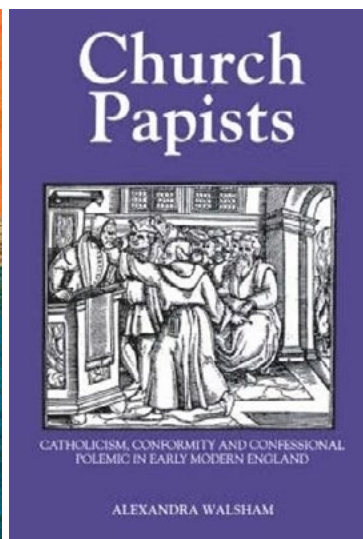
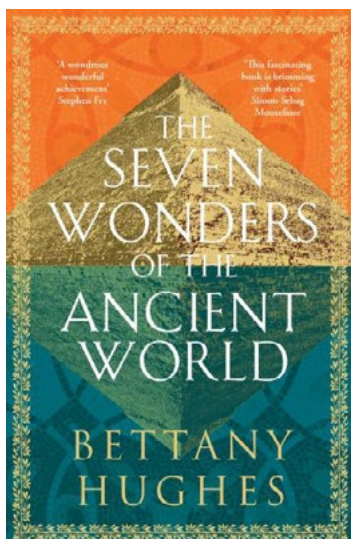
For historians reading is for more than a pastime. It is fundamental to our discipline, as well as an imaginative way to communicate historical events. Language is one of the basic tools for studying and researching history. Good literacy is essential for sharing the outcomes of an historical enquiry, framing arguments and expressing ideas and conclusions about the past. Studying history in the UK requires an ability to understand and access a wide

variety of written sources. Using those sources increases literacy and improves specialist and personal vocabulary.

Records and events of the past have often been shared among groups and carried down generations using stories and storytelling – these stories both support the historical record and continue it.

In 2016 Anthony Beevor in his acceptance of the Medlicott Medal stated that historians in the UK are popular authors as well as academics, because history written in English is often presented using 'strong prose, and storytelling, rather than just academic arguments and statistics'. Making it a pleasure to read, not just a function for knowledge.

In schools, a key pedagogical approach to teaching complex history is to use layered storytelling to deliver breadth and depth of knowledge. This has been exemplified by another Medlicott Medal awardee (2025) Dr Christine Counsell. She is a keen advocate for storytelling in schools' history, frequently writing



about her approaches and methods of using it, and giving talks on it.

For many people of all ages, historical fiction is a key component not only to accessing the past but also to examining its people, the social and moral dilemmas of those involved, and the long-term effects of key events. Reading fiction to explore history enables readers to visit a wide range of time periods, nations and peoples. How many of us still remember our favourite book as a child and how it made us want to find out more about a person, a place and a time? Or simply, how it just made us want to find out more about anything of the world it was set in?

How contemporary events are represented in fiction by writers can also provide historians with both an insight to the past and an understanding of how it was perceived

at the time. Fictionalised accounts of a period can therefore be useful historical sources reflecting a past understanding – for example what does Jane Austen’s work tell us about social ideas of women in the Regency period, or Jonathan Swift about social divisions in Ireland?

Over the years the Historical Association has been an active partner in promoting, celebrating and championing reading. And for 2026 we are going to tell you about that work more regularly.

For instance, fifteen years ago, we created and developed the Young Quills Competition for historical fiction – a competition for published authors that provides young people with an opportunity to review new historical fiction and through the competition stages recognises the best of that new fiction. We also have a competition

encouraging young people to write their own historical fiction.

Throughout the year we will be highlighting our activities and making the connections between history and reading in lots of interesting ways, for example by sharing existing work and introducing new activities and talks. Our Local History Month feature will explain more about what can be done.

To celebrate the year of reading we will be bringing you a story each month that celebrates history and reading and how powerful that connection is. To help us spread the work on the power of history and reading, use our Social Media accounts to send us your favourite historical reads, tagging us, and we will share with our audiences.



Local History Month 2026

(and some planning ahead for 2027)

May is Local and Community History month. For 2026 we are linking it to the year of reading by looking at the importance of writers and local records to historians for bringing a place to life. Places change: that is inevitable and also interesting. New buildings get built, others get torn down and some change purpose. People and families come and go. One of the ways to find out about those changes and to explore the way a place has developed and transformed is to look for local authors and to check local documents. A writer will frequently use a particular place to develop a plot detail, to create atmosphere and to transfer people to a different time. Sometimes the specific place is central to the plot while at other times it is used as simply a backdrop, but in all of these cases a writer can provide a sense of a place and help us to understand how it might have developed.

Furthermore, writers are often shaped by the place they come from and where they live. Where would Thomas Hardy be without Dorset – Wessex, or Emily Bronte without the moors? Contemporary writers will often spend hours poring over old maps and through public documents at their local archives to ensure that they get a place correct if they are setting a book in the past. Some places are better than others for evoking mystery or a sense of jeopardy while others can help to build suspense or a sense of confusion.

Ask yourself how many times you have been inspired to visit a place because of something you read? The story of a local place and the changes that take place are often crucial to a plot – industrial development, outbursts of societal anger, the experiences of those new to an area, such as Laurie Lee's *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning* and Andrea Levy's *Small Island*.



Yorkshire Moors – Wuthering Heights



Thomas Hardy's cottage

Poetry has cast a similar spell for writers and their readers. Wordsworth's Lake District, Dylan Thomas's Wales and more recently Alice Oswald and Devon. And it is not just fiction that highlights the relationship between the place and writers. George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* brings

together the grubby, the generous and the dangerous experiences of different places during a time of national and international depression.

Whether it is prose, poetry or biographies, writers help communicate a sense of a place and the realities of



that place. As readers we can share that sense of location and feel the emotion of a place as well as having the physical space described to us. So, for Local History and Community History Month 2026 we would like to celebrate all the writers that help to bring local histories to life.

They don't need to be famous – just published. Here are a few items to help inspire you.

[George Eliot and Warwickshire history / Historical Association](#)

[Dickens...Hardy...Jarvis?! A novel take on the Industrial Revolution / Historical Association](#)

[Out and about in D.H. Lawrence country / Historical Association](#)

[Dickens' Kent / Historical Association](#)

If you want to write your own account of a local area and how it has changed, then these might help. For guidance on exploring and understanding local

records HA members can use: [Short guides to records / Historical Association](#)

Of course, if you wish to ignore the theme and use the month to share and celebrate your local communities and local histories then please go ahead. We always want to hear more.

The Great Debate and local history

The Great Debate is our annual debating competition for students. The question for 2026 was

How important are personal and public records as evidence for explaining the story or stories of your local area?

All those who reached the semi-finals have been invited to send a written copy of their talk to the HA and it will be published in May on our website – look out for those.



Picture by Gainsborough

Local and Community History Month 2027

Thinking ahead to next year – May 2027 is the 300th anniversary of the birth of the British painter Thomas Gainsborough. Gainsborough was famous for his landscapes, even painting many of his portraits outside. Other painters have used their local area either as their muse or to showcase their skill: artists such as L.S. Lowry and Judith Ackland. Therefore, we would like to celebrate art, artists and local history in 2027 – so starting thinking about that as well!

What got me into history?

Martin Frampton

As early as I can remember, my parents told me stories about the past. Living near the cliffs at Folkestone, I saw the gun emplacements and heard about the town during the Second World War. There were countless stories including a German gun that was fired daily, around 4.00pm, across the channel, the threat of German invasion, my grandparents' refusal to leave their clifftop home, and my grandad's involvement in the home guard. I poured over objects: a gas mask, ration books. I heard accounts of my mother's involvement in the Blitz in London as a nurse. My father was reluctant to recount the horrors of war; however, I gained snippets about his experiences during the war. His training of commandos at Dalry, Scotland, his actions behind enemy lines in Tunisia and Egypt. Stories of army life, including the inquisitive scorpion that ran inside Dad's trousers heading for his private parts that could have prevented my future birth! I quickly learnt how to piece these scraps together to organise a chronology and form a narrative: the Tripoli landings, the Battle of El Alamein, Sicily, the landings at Anzio, the Battle of Monte Cassino (where his best friend, my namesake, was killed). I would later discover correspondence from an Italian soldier, that he had become friends with. After my father's death, 50 years later, I wrote a reply and received a letter from the boy's sister, still living in the Naples apartment, who forwarded it to New York, where he had emigrated after the war. His widow sent back his book of poetry, as professor of English in two universities, thanking me profusely for his 'letter from the grave'. I was especially enthralled when my father spoke of a Russian countess whom he met in Vienna (as part of the Allied Occupation forces), who took him to operas and claimed she was Anastasia. I dined out on that one for most of my career, until DNA proved otherwise. This taught me a salutary



lesson: history is based upon current interpretation of available information and can change at any time. This proved a good assembly topic.

Teaching all age groups (from 6 to 80), at a variety of levels and interests, proved a never-ending challenge. The Schools Council History Project inspired me to get my students to question everything. 35 years as a team leader standardising history 16+ exams encouraged me to push local and oral history. Three long summers working in Tennessee and Indiana gave me a passion for American history, notably the Civil War. Eastern Tennessee, where I left my heart, was occupied by its own state militia. I became obsessed with Border State philosophy. Why did four slave states not secede and join the South? Why was Andrew Johnson such a local hero? This led me to research further and prepare debates on contentious issues. I currently organise and update these for HA meetings at our Essex branch.

Questioning is an essential tool for an historian. Never accept anything, always look for motive, circumstance and corroboration. I quickly learnt that concepts can be easily misunderstood

or taken for granted. In my first year of teaching primary, in a Year 4 class, I was explaining why spiral staircases were usually clockwise, due to lack of 'sinister' left-hand training, when halted by the response, 'Well, if they got up to the battlements that way, how did they get down again?' It's always good to be challenged.

Historical reconstructions are moments in time that linger far beyond bums-on-seats in hot, stuffy classrooms. As a rookie on teaching practice, I took my class of 30+ to Tewkesbury to work through the main events of the 1471 battle. The armies took position on site but were abruptly stopped by an irate farmer ordering us off his field. Similarly, with two Year 10 GCSE groups I organised a St Valentine's Day Massacre on the playground, with snowballs. This was curtailed by a similarly irate headmaster impolitely enquiring as to why two teachers were publicly scrapping during a snowstorm. Always get prior permission.

The constraints of timetables work to the detriment of most subjects, especially history. To improve students' field work, site visits are a must, and a Humanities Field Week, with similar-minded geographers, provided first-class experiences. Weeks in Northumberland, exploring Hadrian's Wall and Norman border castles, were great, but two study weeks in Denmark to study the Vikings were even better. (Students stop me in the street and recount their memories to this day!) We sat in a reconstructed Viking longhouse in Trelleborg, discussing preparations for a raid on England. (You couldn't make it up!) At the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, you could row a reconstructed longboat down the fjord, make camp, catch fish, cook them over an open fire and sing war songs, (staying overnight if you were brave). The glass

floors of the museum were cleverly constructed to make it appear that the ships were actually floating on water. Unforgettable.

In an on-going effort to engage the students, I endeavoured to encourage debates (when time constraints allowed). I ran school elections for every British general election and every American presidential election, as well as two European referendums. Many apathetic learners became excited at the chance of a good argument. One big regret is retiring before the current incumbents was elected!

On reflection, my greatest moments were putting students in charge of their own learning. Organising an

archaeological dig on the school field and watching the faces of 7–11 year olds light up when they found old coins and Victorian pottery and asked if they could find out more about them. The Schools Council had got me into 'interrogating the resources' – never accept anything at face value. Angela, my exam boss and friend, drilling it into us to 'look at the provenance!' remains tattooed on my brain.

My biggest regret is not being able to go back and teach better with all the knowledge and experience that I now possess. Teaching, i.e. the shaping of pupils' minds, is such a powerful privilege and I was honoured to be given a part in it, and to watch students develop and use those skills in later life.

John, my closest friend, and former pupil, explained at a meeting in Number 10 Downing Street, why he fell in love with history after I had used a 4-foot scaled model of Newcastle Keep to explain how to attack and defend a castle. I shall take that memory to my grave.

BACKGROUND: 40 years' experience in teaching in secondary (23) and primary (17) sectors, from History Main Scale to headteacher. Team Leader for GCSE History and American Studies. Additional interests in archaeology and American + British government and politics.



For readers aged 5-8 years

The Boy Who Became Queen

Christina Balit

For readers aged 8-11 years

A Box Full of Murders	Janice Hallett
A Stocking Full of Spies	Robin Stevens
Angel's Teeth	Debbie Moss
Becoming Grace	Hilary McKay
Dance of Resistance	Catherine Johnson
Hero the Highway Girl	Penny Chrimes
Hidden Treasure	Jessie Burton
Hunt for the Golden Scarab	M.G. Leonard (illustrated by Manuel Šumberac)
Letty and the Mystery of the Golden Thread	Penny Boxall
Lockett & Wilde: The Ghosts of London	Lucy Strange (illustrated by Pam Smy)
My Family, the Enemy	Karen McCombie
Netta Becker and the Timeline Crime	Jennifer Claessen
Shrapnel Boys	Jenny Pearson
Spirit Warriors	Ashley Thorpe
The Black Pennant	Joseph Lamb
The Boy at the Window	Lucy Strange
The Elixir	Lindsay Galvin
The Girl Who Raced the World	Nat Harrison
The Kid Who Fell Through Time	Chris Smith & Greg James
The Legend of Viking Thunder	M.G. Leonard (illustrated by Manuel Šumberac)
The Line They Drew Through Us	Hiba Noor Khan
Through Iron Eyes: An Anglo-Saxon Adventure	Victoria Williamson (illustrated by Art Spellman)
Time Tub Travellers Circus Mystery	Claire Linney
Tomorrow's Ghost	Tanya Landman
Wrong Tracks	Susan Brownrigg (illustrated by Jenny Czerwonka)

For readers aged 11-13 years

Flipped	Philip Caveney
Kata and Tor	Kevin Crossley-Holland
Dawn of Adonis	Phil Earle
To War With Wallace	Barbara Henderson
Under a Fire-Red Sky	Geraldine McCaughrean
Under the London Sky	Anna Woltz

For readers aged 14 years and above

A Clash of Claws: 1066	Darius Morgan
Birdy Arbutnot's Year of 'Yes'	Joanna Nadin
Black Star	Kwame Alexander
Lobster Blue	Jacqueline King
Searching For the Remarkable in Things	Natalie Lucy
Songs for Ghosts	Clara Kumagai
The Boy I Love	William Hussey
Thunderstruck	R. J. Madon



The Dawson Lecture 2026

Mike Maddison

Dr Michael Maddison has been a respected educationalist for over 50 years. As a classroom teacher and as a school senior leader he was always trusted with curriculum design, interpretation and delivery, and school improvement. It was an obvious step for him to join Ofsted in 2006 as an inspector, quickly rising to be National Lead for History in 2008, a post he held for just under ten years. He left Ofsted in 2015 to set up on his own as a consultant, specialising in curriculum and leadership, history education and heritage learning.

For 2026 the Historical Association have awarded Dr Maddison the Dawson Lecture which is given to celebrate an individual who has supported and nurtured history teachers and teaching. We caught up with him to find out more about his career, his thoughts on history, and what still motivates him.

Q: In a full and busy career, what have been some of the highlights?

Becoming an history teacher – I know that sounds somewhat modest, but it was an ambition from a young age so being able to fulfil it was really important. The study of history is vital, and the profession of teaching is a noble one – these are two things that I really value.

Another highlight is seeing my students flourish and succeed when studying history. Over the years I've seen how well they have continued to do, such as the author and historian Kate Vigurs (currently a visiting academic at the University of Warwick) who I taught at GCSE and with whom I am still good friends. In her acknowledgements in her book *Mission France*, she thanks me for instilling in her 'a love of history'. That is immensely satisfying.

Being the national lead for history at Ofsted was another highlight. I really enjoyed that role even when it was challenging, notably after 2010.



Dr Michael Maddison

And some of the challenges were not just difficult but also revealing. I had always appreciated that history can be provocative and open to different interpretations but, in 2011, I really felt how some of those challenges are rooted in political as well as historical argument. When my report *History for All* was published, the British America-based historian Niall Ferguson, who had been appointed, along with Simon Schama, by Michael Gove to advise on the new history curriculum, wrote a 'robust review' of my report that vividly brought home just how contentious history can be.

Q: What is your favourite history memory growing up?

It is really difficult to identify one specific memory. Growing up there were regular trips to historical sites that fascinated me, but there are a few memories in particular that stand out. One of the earliest involved going to church every Sunday where my mother was a Sunday school teacher. And I remember being in church and staring at the armorial funeral hatchments on the wall and wondering whom they remembered and what those people had done to be so celebrated.

As a child we had many summer holidays caravanning in Felixstowe. By the old docks there was a huge black crane that was used for lifting flying boats from the sea and that fascinated me. It helped to open up the idea that history is all around us – I just wanted to know, 'Why is that there?'.

My home county is Suffolk, and I went to school in the 1960s in Woodbridge. Nearby, of course, is Sutton Hoo and I was intrigued by this whole idea of a ship burial. We would pass the site regularly and early on was born an ambition to see the original finds. It wasn't until 1971 when I eventually made it to the British Museum to see the treasures, at the same time as I also went to see the iconic Tutankhamun Exhibition.

One very specific memory is not a favourite but had a profound effect on me. It concerned my maternal grandfather who served in the Army Service Corps in the First World War and was then a firewatcher in Oldham during the Second World War. I spent much time with him, and he would talk about his war medals but not about the First World War itself. I only ever saw him cry once, but it happened every year on Remembrance Sunday. I have always wondered what he experienced which had such an impact upon him as well as me.

And all these experiences just made me want to ask more questions and to know more.

Q:which leads to the question, what drew you to history as a career?

My supportive parents fed my curiosity with history. I read lots of history books and to this day favourites of mine were the Ladybird history books and such novels as 'The Eagle of the Ninth', by Rosemary Sutcliff. I was also very lucky to have two great history teachers who inspired my love of history and nurtured

my ambition to want to teach history. So, the trips to castles and historic sites across East Anglia, the annual visits to the open days at the USAF base at Bentwaters, extensive reading and pastimes such as brass rubbing in country churches, all conspired to draw me to a career in history.

Q: What has the study of history meant to you?

Firstly – employment. When I was teaching there was never a day I didn't want to go to work. Even when I was a member of SLT I still taught Year 9 and an A-level group.

Secondly, it has always meant that I am intrigued by the places I visit. It brings me constant enjoyment whenever I go anywhere, because there is always something new to see, discover and learn.

In effect, history has bought me satisfaction in my job and in my leisure time.

Q: Why is history education important?

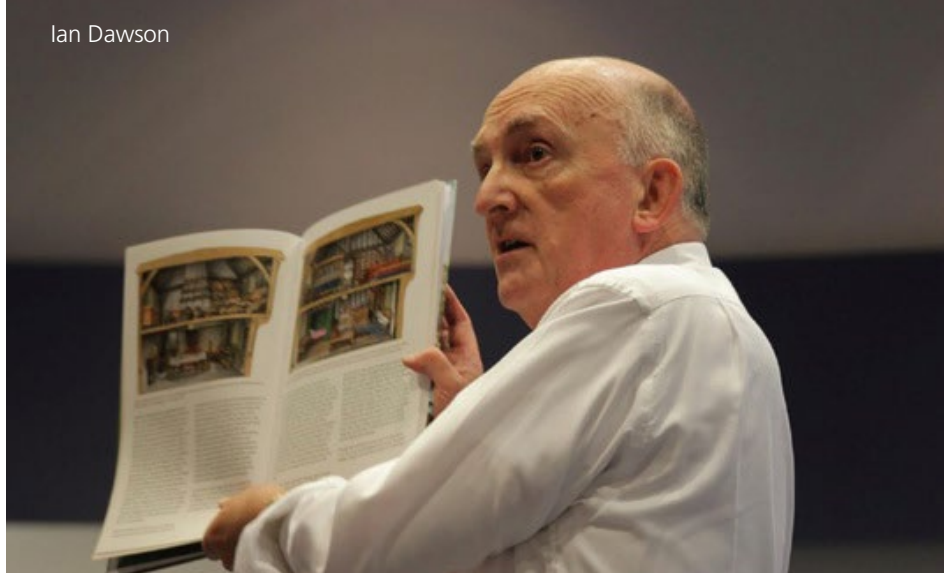
History must be taught in schools because it is essential for a young person's development. Knowing who we are, where we come from, why things are as they are, these are key questions. History gives us a foundation, a place to ground ourselves and where we can root our perspective on the past, the present and the future. Ultimately, history education is about the future, and as Herbet Hoover once noted, 'the supreme purpose of [studying] history is a better world'.

A good history education can also help young people to be more comfortable with uncertainty. In the challenging times in which we live, providing young people with an understanding of the present and a handle on how we might approach the issues which face us will hopefully help all of us to create that better world.

Q: What is/are your favourite part(s) of history and why?

When we think of favourite parts, I would have to distinguish between periods, places and people, consider what is known and unknown. and include family history.

For period, it has to be the eighteenth century which I taught at A-level



for many years and I really enjoyed it. Visiting places where key events occurred or important people lived takes me to Sutton Hoo, York and its majestic Gothic cathedral, to the great palaces of Paris and St Petersburg. For people, it has to be such known characters as King Redwald, who I think was buried at Sutton Hoo, and the Korean Admiral Yi Sun Sin who used the Geobukseon, or armoured turtle ship, in the sixteenth century to outwit the Japanese invaders. Then there are the unknown people. The majority of people who across time have had no power, no money, and no status and for whom staying above the subsistence level was all that mattered. These people raised families and built our great cathedrals and knew they would never see them completed. That is just unimaginable for us, and I find such aspects of the past totally fascinating.

There also has to be a place for family history, searching for that baptismal record or the marriage which unlocks the previous generation.

Q: What do you think are your achievements?

As a history teacher my main achievement was undoubtedly enabling students to access, enjoy and learn about the past. Six months ago, for example, I heard from a former student of 20 years past who is now a pilot. He wanted to thank me for giving him a lifelong love of history which he is now passing on to his children. Stories like that make me happy.

I'm very proud of the 2011 *History for All* report and being able to influence the history curriculum when Michael Gove was trying to impose his views on what should be studied in history in schools.

Of course, my wife would say that finishing my PhD was my greatest achievement. Anyone who has completed a research degree will know just how difficult it is to finish the task and manage a job at the same time. This is not an achievement as such, but I am really pleased that the large collection of history teaching textbooks I have gathered over my 50 years in teaching – over 400 in all – will be kept together. I have donated them to the library at UCL, and I am sure that in time they will help researchers to understand how we have presented history to pupils in school textbooks and how that has changed over the decades.

Q: What is the topic of your Dawson Lecture?

It will be on the Historical Association's strategic vision 'History of all, for all'. I want to explore what that really means and what are its implications. I want to look at some of the barriers that stand in our way, including, for example, politicians who cannot stop intervening. I will look at it through my journey in history education, and I will, no doubt, flavour it with one or two stories of being an inspector....

Dr Michael Maddison has been involved with some of the more important changes in history education over the past 25 years and continues to be at the front right now, guiding history education in schools through its next stages:

We at the HA cannot think of a safer pair of hands – inclusive and fair-minded – to hold the fate of the history community. The Dawson Lecture will be delivered at HA Conference on Friday 15 May.

The Great Debate 2026 – the final!

The Great Debate concluded on 21 March 2026 in Central London following a thrilling day. The competition started in the autumn of 2025 with heats running across the UK and online until February 2026. The three semi-finals held online led to the 21 finalists who were invited to London for the final stage with their families present.

Across the day was a wide range of outstanding talks that left most of the audience wondering how the judges were going to choose a winner, a runner up and two Highly Commended from such a strong field. Indeed, it did prove difficult, with the judges insisting on having a third runner up just so that they could find a way to agree!

The question that each of the young people all addressed was:

How important are personal and public records as evidence for explaining the story or stories of your local area?

As one of the judges Professor Lucy Noakes said:

The diversity and range of the histories that we heard about was striking: we were taken from the role of Gaelic in Scottish identity to the impact of Nazi occupation in Jersey; from the aftermath of a Turkish earthquake to a flogging on eighteenth-century Hounslow Heath, and from a woman imprisoned in a Syrian cell during the civil war to a woman chained in a nineteenth-century Barnsley workhouse. We learnt how to read the historic landscape of a Lancashire village and how to trace the histories of fishing in Devon and of the saffron trade in north Essex. Local histories were retold through the eyes and the words of migrants and of the working class, while a gendered lens was used to analyse the written histories of an Oxford College.



The 2026 winners

At the final the students present their five-minute talk to three judges all of whom this year are professional historians led by the Historical Association president, Professor Alex Walsham, Professor of Modern History, Cambridge; who was supported by: Professor Lucy Noakes, Rab Butler chair in Modern History, Essex; and Dr Antonio Sennis, Associate Professor of Medieval History, UCL.

Winner:

- Roddy McLuskey, James Gillespie's High School, Edinburgh

Runner up:

- Duni Kariuki, Cheltenham Ladies' College

Highly commended:

- Afeefah Daji, Batley Girls' High School
- Bilal Nashawi, William Farr School
- Dhaani Singh, Withington Girls' School

The competition is open to students from years 10 to 13. The competition is in the style of a Balloon debate so they are not arguing against one another but are required to answer the

question posed, demonstrate that they have carried out historical research and can provide evidence to deliver their conclusions.

All of those who took part in the final did exceptionally well, with the judges needing extra time to reach an agreement. Their final thoughts on their decision are summed up here by Professor Walsham:

Winner

Roddy McLuskey

Roddy's speech was an original, striking and distinctive exploration of the history of the Gaelic language and its speakers in Edinburgh and the Highlands and Islands. Drawing on a set of rediscovered manuscripts now in the National Library of Scotland, it highlighted the long hiatus in Gaelic scholarship created by their neglect and considered the interplay between the oral and written in the history of the Gaelic language. Roddy spoke movingly of language as an expression of humanity and as the 'heartbeat of the past'. His speech was beautifully written and a pleasure and privilege to hear. All three judges were immensely impressed by Roddy's performance.



The 2026 finalists

Runner up

Duni Kariuki

Duni's presentation was a passionate discussion of how both public and personal records neglect important actors in the history of Nairobi during World War II. Thoughtful and sophisticated from the start, it was filled with resonant points and compelling turns of phrase. It warned of the danger that surviving written sources tell us not who was there, but who was allowed to be seen and whose voices were deemed worthy of recording. It urged the audience to pay attention not just to ink on paper, but memories conveyed down the generations by word of mouth. This was a powerful performance that impressed the judges greatly.

Highly commended

Afeefah Daji

Afeefah's speech was imaginative and powerful. It drew a compelling contrast between the two lines of medical notes that survive for a long-term inmate of the Barnsley workhouse and the diary of the daughter of an educated landowning family. It thoughtfully interpreted the silences in the historical record as well as the surviving sources. It was a moving clarion call for acknowledging that some lives have been deemed to have mattered more than others and for the need to consider those who have been forgotten as well as those who have been remembered.

Bilal Nashawi

Bilal's speech told the powerful and passionate story of the protests against dictatorship and state repression in Damascus in 2011 and of the fear, loss, and struggle experienced by those who participated in them. Drawing on a surviving personal record of his

own grandmother's detention and on the pictures taken by a government forensic photographer, this excellent presentation demonstrated impressive rhetorical skills. Full of thoughtful insights, it highlighted how absence and silence can speak volumes about traumatic and formative experiences in the past.

Dhaani Singh

Dhaani's speech centred on the Civil War history of the city of Chester, especially during the siege of this Royalist stronghold in 1644–46. It made striking use of urban architecture, maps, engineering surveys, and personal diaries to evoke the experience of those who lived through these turbulent years and to show that 'boring bricks' and material scars on the built environment can bring to life the history of distant times. Dhaani held the attention of her audience throughout and told her story persuasively and well.

Further comments from the judges included:

Professor Lucy Noakes:

I was privileged to be a judge at the national finals of the HA's Great Debate competition in London this year. The quality of the talks from all the finalists was outstanding. All the finalists showed an impressive ability to conduct historical research, deliver an effective argument concerning a complex historical question and – most strikingly – to show both how history is made and why it matters.

Dr Antonio Sennis:

It was a genuine privilege to be part of the judging panel at this year's HA Great Debate national finals in London. The level of work on display was deeply impressive, not simply in terms of polish, but in the seriousness of engagement and the confidence with which students handled demanding material. There was a strong sense throughout that these were not rehearsed narratives, but carefully considered interpretations shaped by curiosity, judgement, and independence of thought.

Across the board, finalists demonstrated a capacity not only to investigate the past, but to weigh evidence, make choices, and sustain an argument under pressure. Above all, they showed an understanding that history is not a fixed body of knowledge, but an ongoing process of questioning, interpretation, debate, and that this process has real intellectual and civic value.

All the talks will be available online later in the year. And all those who reached the semifinal were invited to submit a written version of the talk to be published on the HA website in May.

We are grateful for the support we have received for the competition by our sponsor Rayburn Tours. They have a written a blog about the final that can be found here

Each year we pose a new question which for 2027, with heats starting in the autumn of this year, will be:

Can your local environment help us to understand national and global histories?

The Medicott Medal

2026 will be the fortieth time that the Historical Association will have awarded the Medicott Medal. The Medicott Medal is usually awarded annually (there was an exception during Covid times, to individuals for outstanding services and current contributions to history. It is named after a distinguished past HA president, Professor W.N. Medicott (president 1952–55).

In more than 40 years it has gone to some of the UK's most outstanding and acclaimed scholars working in academia. This has included university professors such as Eric Howbsbawn, Richard Evans, Margaret MacMillan and Catherine Hall – academics who have done much to develop the study of history and to inspire younger generations of scholars as well as rise above the work of their peers. Sometimes those academics have also been household names through their television and broadcasting work, such as Bettany Hughes, Simon Schama, Mary Beard and Michael Wood. Those historians have helped to raise the profile of history beyond the world of education. They have stepped beyond their universities to educate and inform a wide range of audiences.

The medal has also been awarded to significant individuals not working in academia but in the world of public history, an early recipient was the journalist and broadcaster Magnus Magnusson, best known for hosting 'Mastermind', but also the author of a number of history books. His published work helped to demonstrate the role that well known figures played in publishing good quality history books to wider audiences. Similarly, the former British politician Roy Jenkins was awarded the Medicott Medal in 1997 acknowledging the significant contribution he had made to history through the publishing of a range of important political biographies.

Another journalist Melvyn Bragg was given the medal in 2009. He had studied history at Oxford and used those skills in many of his journalistic roles, in particular as the host of Radio 4's





history discussion programme 'In our time' which introduced key historical arguments to audiences every week through the discussion of historians and writers. That role of bringing history to a popular audience was an important recognition of the outstanding services to history criteria of the Medicott Medal.

The fact that the medal is not solely about academic achievement and that those extra components such as drawing history into the public sphere, challenging misconceptions, seeking and sharing knowledge with different audiences, sets it apart from more book-based history awards. When David Olusoga was awarded the medal in 2022 it was not just for his important written work and documentary series, it was because he was opening up history for wider inclusion, ensuring that the stories of marginalised groups were no longer excluded from key narratives. As a public historian he was prepared to tackle the prejudices of previous generations and to challenge those who misuse history or misrepresent historical information for political gain.

In some instances those who have been awarded the medal have not been

household names or distinguished academics at universities but have been individuals who have done much to champion history in the formal education sphere, those who have led curriculum design and championed history for the education profession, including Chris Culpin and Christine Counsell.

The key element is an 'outstanding contribution'. It is fair to say that the field of those awarded the medal has been wide, and yet it has not covered all areas that are used to promote access to history. It is notable that of all those who have received it none have been awarded it because of their role in writing historical fiction. Lady Antonia Fraser was awarded the Medal in 2000, but this was for her prolific career in writing biographies and not for her few books of historical fiction. Perhaps this is an area that should be acknowledged as an 'outstanding contribution'?

How do we choose who gets the Medicott Medal?

Nominations for the Medicott Medal can be made by any HA member. In previous years nominations have mainly come from our branches and

committees, but moving forward we want all our membership to feel engaged with the process. We are asking all HA members to think who they believe should be awarded the medal and why. The medal has been typically announced in the summer months, but to provide more time for nominations we are planning on making the award in the autumn of 2026. Therefore, we would like any member of the HA as well as our branches and committees to consider putting forward the names of those who they believe should be considered for the Medicott Medal.

All nominations will then be presented to the HA Executive Committee (our most senior governing board) for consideration. Please send nominations to: office@history.org.uk by 15 June 2026.

The Medicott winner is notified in advance of their win so that they can give a talk. The Historical Association's annual event is becoming a must for local, educational and academic historians.



Bath Branch centenary

The Historical Association was founded in 1906, with individual branches formed in the months and years following. Some of the original branches (or *nearly* original ones) still exist – making them historical ‘Historical Association branches’. One of those is the Bath Branch, founded in 1926 during the interwar years to meet the desire for increased access to educational fulfilment and stimulation.

To celebrate, the branch has organised a centenary year with a wealth of leading historians, events, and civic events. The whole programme starts in April 2026 and runs until 2027. The branch was founded at a civic reception at Bath’s Guildhall in 1926 so it is fitting that the start of the centenary year will be a lecture on 16 April in Bath’s Guildhall with well-known historian and author Tracey Borman (HA Fellow). Also present and providing the speech of honour was HA President, Professor Alexandra Walsham whose speech is included below:

I congratulate the branch on its birthday. Its longevity is a tribute to the commitment and dedication of many volunteers who have helped it to flourish over these years.

This is one of the branches that epitomises the best of the HA – lively range of speakers in its annual programme and an array of other activities. Welcoming to new faces and supportive of old members. A model of how to run a branch.

It is one of a network of 45 branches, which stretch from Glasgow and Edinburgh to Swansea, Plymouth, and across London, the Midlands, and the south east. I’ve visited more than 30 of them during my tenure as President – each has its own distinctive character and it has been a pleasure to travel around the country meeting those who make the HA what it is today. This is one of my penultimate tasks before I hand over to my successor in May.

The HA itself is in its 120th year. It was founded in 1906 by a small group of history teachers and academic historians to support the growing need for good history resources in schools. It was one of a number of subject associations that were born about the same time. Within a few years the HA acquired a further aim, to further the study and investigation of history for all. It was granted a royal charter and has King Charles as its patron. It is a Charity that calls itself the Voice for History. It produces journals and publications – *The Historian* and *History*, as well as publications for teachers of primary and secondary history. It works closely with RHS, IHR and History UK to represent the subject nationally, and connections with the BA.

Over the last hundred years the study and the subject of History has undergone many changes and has had to adapt to shifting circumstances.

Two world wars, global conflicts, changes in relationship with other nations in the British Isles and with Europe, as well as covid pandemic. Changing government priorities and remodelling of national curriculum. Growth of Higher Education and expansion of universities, including conversion of polytechnics. Major shifts in technology – rise of the internet and now of AI.

HA changing in accordance with the times – virtual branches, short courses, Young Quills awards, Great Debate – final recently held – role of branches in helping to support and sustain this brilliant initiative to foster public speaking about history among school students

Today there remains an enormous appetite for History in British society. But also signs of decline in interest of students in studying History at A-level and University. Crisis in university funding, retrenchment of staff and contraction and closure of departments. Rising costs and economic pressures – affecting all charities and organisations that rely on subscription income Voluntary organisations feeling the squeeze – challenge of successive planning. Dangers of misinformation and erosion of trust and of truth. What should be believe?

Context of changing culture of communication – rival ways of feeding appetite for History – books, television, radio, internet, other heritage organisations, podcasts, online interviews, social media etc. How can the HA compete?

We need to encourage new collaborations between those interested in History in all spheres – in schools, universities, general public. We need to keep the flame of History alight at a time when its value is sometimes questioned – and when the AI can summarise vast amounts of information in the blink of an eye.

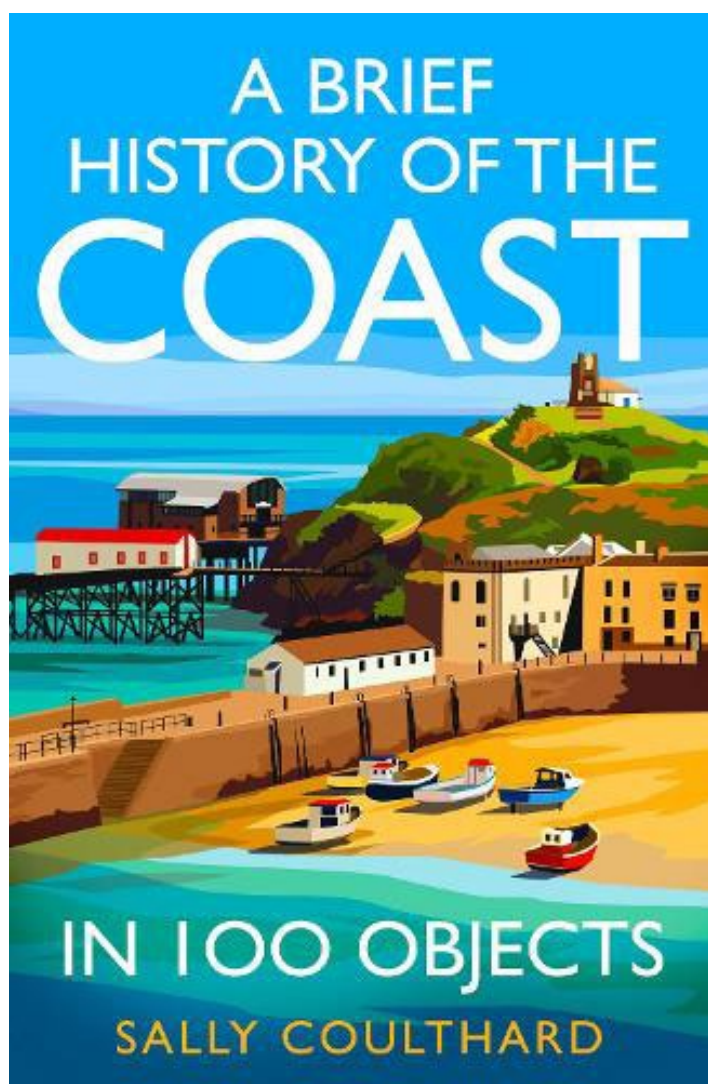
What history teaches us is how to think critically – never was this needed more than now. It teaches us to be sceptical about sources, to interrogate the hidden assumptions they carry, to ask sharp questions, to strive to comprehend the foreign country that is the past, however alien it might seem, rather than to judge it. It teaches us empathy and sympathy. It is a subject that reminds us of the experiences that unite us with our predecessors and that make us human.

Finally, there is nothing quite like the human voice – face to face encounters and inspiration of hearing someone passionate and knowledgeable about their subject speak – charismatic, powerful and evangelical. Infectious and contagious enthusiasm. These are mutually enriching encounters between lecturers and audiences. I always come away having learnt something myself. Long may it last, here in Bath and everywhere around the country.

So renewed congratulations to Bath on its 100th birthday.



Meet the author



Sally Coulthard is a public historian who specialises in the history of the natural world and material culture. Her new book *A Brief History of the Coast in 100 Objects* will be published in June 2026 and she is our speaker for the Virtual Branch in May.

What inspired you to write a history of the coast?

Short answer: a fake nose.

Longer answer: I discovered a beautiful – if rather macabre – prosthetic nose in the archives of the Science Museum. Several exquisitely crafted artificial noses survive in museum collections, some dating back to the sixteenth century. They were designed, among other things, to conceal the disfiguring effects of syphilis, a disease that arrived in Britain through maritime trade in the late fifteenth century. It struck me immediately that behind this nose was a story about the coast – its opportunities, but also its costs. And, I wondered how many more were out there.

As I delved deeper, I uncovered countless fascinating snippets connected to ‘coastal objects’: stories about diet, health, warfare, science, craft, exploitation, poverty, art, and leisure. I wanted to show that the coast is not simply a narrow perimeter around the country, but a sieve through which much of our culture has been filtered.

Take whaling, for example. It shaped our coastline, funded coastal communities, and trained explorers and expert navigators. Although it is a period of history we are glad to have left behind, the really interesting question, for me, was why it was so profitable in the first place. I discovered that whale products – baleen, blubber, spermaceti, even ambergris – were the equivalents of modern plastics, fossil fuels, fragrances, etc.: ubiquitous and essential, yet now largely forgotten in domestic history.

The fortunes of the coast have influenced the entire nation, often in surprising ways. In the book, I explore everything from tuberculosis cures and the history of Shell to Nazi occupation and the changing story of seafood. It also floats through tales of early industry, niche fashions, animal welfare, children's entertainment and much more besides...

How did you collect and select your key sources for this book?

As with my previous book, *A Brief History of the Countryside in 100 Objects*, I knew my first and last objects from the outset.

I wanted to begin at the moment Britain became an island nation, both physically and psychologically. So I chose the Colinda Spear (c.9800 BCE), a hunting weapon found off the Norfolk coast that tells the story of Britain being cut off from mainland Europe by rising sea levels. The final object is one of Antony Gormley's *Another Place* statues on Crosby Beach near Liverpool. These sublime figures, gazing out to sea, encapsulate many of the book's themes: the liminal nature of the coast, the dangers and opportunities, the vastness of both the ocean and of coastal history, the slow accretion of knowledge, the coastal grafters and grifters, the ever-changing nature of the landscape and so on.

For the remaining objects, I largely followed the stories themselves. One object often led naturally to another. Sometimes I began with a theme and searched for the perfect object to embody it. Some items came from personal memory – Object 99, for example, is a Bird's Eye Spanish Vegetable Medley, a bland attempt to recreate Mediterranean colour and vivacity. It speaks of expanding travel horizons, changing tastes, and the decline of the traditional British seaside holiday. Other objects, by contrast, are breathtaking archaeological discoveries that reveal just how cosmopolitan our coastline has always been. I tend to veer happily between the sublime and the ridiculous.

How important is it for each generation of historians to reinterpret existing materials? How important is material culture?

Material culture speaks to me for several reasons:

First, history is often written by winners – but objects help recover the lives of those people history often ignores: children, the poor, the illiterate, craftspeople, women, and the elderly, for example.

Second, objects are tangible and accessible. They appeal to practical thinkers and non-academics. My husband, for example, is profoundly dyslexic and learns through doing; objects create connections beyond language. Give a practical person an artefact and they immediately ask questions about materials, function, craftsmanship, and value.

Objects invite enquiry. They allow us to test ideas and assumptions, forming the basis of experimental history and archaeology.

Most importantly, objects tell multiple stories at once. In the book, for example, I include a tobacco resuscitation kit from 1785. This now-obsolete object reveals tobacco's role as a medicinal plant, early lifesaving practices, swimming statistics, and some wonderfully bizarre medical treatments. It is also outrageously funny – but readers will have to discover that for themselves.

Being an historian can be a lonely business – do you enjoy collaborating?

Do you remember group projects at primary school, when the teacher insisted everyone work together on a story or artwork? There was always one child who preferred working alone. That was me.

Ownership of my work and creative life matters a great deal to me. Working independently means I take responsibility if something fails – and all the pleasure if it succeeds.

How many drafts do you produce before submitting?

One – and it has to be neat as a pin. My mother was an English teacher. Blame her.

Tell me about the new book?

A Brief History of the Coast in 100 Objects is an immersive and unconventional history of our coastlines and the people who have shaped them. The coast means something different to everyone: a place of pleasure and reckless pursuits, fishing and fearless endeavour, and a landscape of crashing beauty. It has also always been our first line of defence and our gateway to other cultures.

Through 100 carefully selected objects, the book explores the many ways coastlines have shaped – and been shaped by – our history, culture, and identity. From Roman lighthouses to rosary beads, from knitted jumpers to Viking slave shackles, each object opens a window onto a unique story.

Moving beyond nostalgic images of seaside holidays, the book reveals the coast as a site of trade, conflict, innovation, and cultural exchange. Readers discover how coastal life influenced belief systems, economies, medicine, and even domestic routines. Looking outward to sea, Britain's story emerges as inseparable from those of our European neighbours and distant shores beyond.

From smugglers' underpants and sailors' hoaxes to whale vomit and pickled puffin, the book celebrates the strange, surprising, and deeply human stories that continually wash up along the British coast.

What are you up to next?

I'm just finishing a book about folklore and the natural world, which I've hugely enjoyed writing, and then I'll begin a larger project exploring the long and complex history of our relationship with animals.

In two or three sentences, what do you most enjoy about being an historian – and why?

First, your working life is never dull. Second, it makes you exceptionally good at pub quizzes. And third, it helps you appreciate just how lucky we are to live when we do.



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