

Memories of Helen Snelson

At the end of August 2024, we shared the news that our good friend, supporter and Deputy President Helen Snelson had passed away, after her cancer had recurred. Sadly, we were too late to include a tribute in the autumn *HA News*, but we have asked a couple of her friends to say something in this edition – not a long list of achievements (there are too many) or a quick bio (there is a brief one at the end, for anyone interested), but a few thoughts on what they will remember and why others should as well.

I first met Helen when she was Head of History at the Mount School in York in 2006. I had taken a temporary maternity cover and was teaching my second subject, English. Helen had found out that I was actually an historian by trade and came to seek me out. 'I hear you teach history,' she said, and proceeded to give me an Oxford tutorial-style grilling. I must have passed because at the end she expressed approval, not only of my history but also of my ability to swear like a trooper. 'Ah, good,' she said, 'you're a swearer' – and so our friendship was born.

The next year, I joined the Mount history department and I was able to watch Helen in action. She taught at incredible speed, covering swathes of content and leaving not a minute to spare. It was breathtaking. But the most memorable activities from this period were our Wednesday after-school enrichment trips with the Year 7 girls. Helen planned a dizzying range of activities – one day we were sifting through mud on the Hungate archaeological dig; the next we were 'fossicking', as she liked to call it, around the undercroft of the Minster – and Helen knew everyone in York and got us 'in', everywhere. My favourite game by far was one that proved intensely dangerous for our charges, and that was taking old photos of York and photocopying them onto overhead projector transparencies. We'd then give the students the task of trying to line up the photo with the current view. It was mesmerising, but led to a few of us having near misses with traffic as we tried to get the perfect line-up. (This wasn't in the risk assessment.)



'I'm getting the history tingle,' the girls used to say on our outings, and sometimes they would reach out and touch an old medieval, Georgian or Victorian building in awe, as if to test whether it was real.

The other thing to remember about those 'Investigating York' trips was how very fast Helen could walk.

'Keep up at the back,' she would call behind her. My job was to chivvy the lagging Year 7s, who were red-faced and puffing. 'Come on,' she'd call back, 'or we'll miss it...' You were never quite sure what it was you were going to miss, but the Year 7s would break into a reluctant jog to try to match her pace. Once, during a flood, we were cut off by protective metal barriers.

To go back and take the alternative route would make us extremely late, so Helen and I looked at each other and shrugged, and then proceeded to leg the Year 7s over the floodgates. (I don't think that was in the risk assessment either.)

In 2010, I moved on from the Mount to Millthorpe, a local state school, but Helen and I didn't stop collaborating. 'Why don't we do a joint battlefield tour?' she suggested in my first year. She arranged a meeting with our headteacher and sweet-talked him into agreement. Soon this trip became a yearly feature. After a while, Helen decided that she didn't like having a paid guide and that we, the teachers, could do a much better job of organising a more bespoke battlefields tour. This result was incredible, with local York stories and drama activities woven through the tour. When we reached Thiepval, the Memorial to the Missing of the Somme, Helen presented each student with a picture of a front door from the area around our schools. 'The men who lived inside these houses died here at the Somme, but their bodies were never found,' she told the coach of children. 'The letters informing their families of their deaths would have come through these doors. Can you find their names on the memorial?' So, each 15-year-old walked, clutching a door from their home city, searching for the name of a lost soldier, who they now felt belonged to them.

Our trips began to expand from the battlefields. Back in 2009, Helen had made a successful bid for a competition to win an all-expenses-paid trip to study Cold War Berlin with the Imperial War Museum. Being Helen, she didn't want to just take students from the Mount but opened it out to keen historians from schools across York. We were partnered with a German school and our students collaborated on the project and took the tour together. This was the first of many such projects. Rather than a straightforward cultural exchange trip, students from Germany and York worked together on a variety of themes of historical significance, like national identity or remembrance. It was a quirky, imaginative project but an administrative nightmare! Ordinary people would have quaked at the to-do list, but Helen simply rolled up her sleeves and problem solved. As our friend and colleague Hugh Richards

said, 'Any fool can suggest an idea, but Helen could make stuff happen.'

Helen and I continued to work together, creating masterclasses for keen-bean history students across York. My most memorable masterclass was when we tried to work out the possible location

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of York's Roman amphitheatre, which has never been found. Helen used her contacts at the York Archaeological Trust to procure us a recently excavated 'gladiator' skeleton and we asked the archaeologists to talk us through what the skeleton showed, leg irons, tiger tooth wounds and all. Unsurprisingly, we had a few fainters on that one (definitely not in the risk assessment!).

Helen eventually moved out of the classroom and into the arms of the University of York, where she was able to influence and inspire a new generation of history teachers. It was wonderful to watch Helen expand into this role. She worked hand in hand with the university and the Historical Association to create a formidable network of history tutors who could mentor her charges. Helen referred to her PGCE students as her chicks, and she was like a good parent to them, infinitely patient and kind, but also challenging them to reach their potential. Similarly, throughout the YorkClio network, which she helped me run, Helen helped create professional networks that ran far deeper than any multi-academy branding.

In 2021, Helen worked with myself and other history teachers on a textbook

on British social history, exploring the experiences of disability, sexuality, gender and ethnicity. Her aims were ambitious, challenging us to include named women in at least half the stories we told and to also make it regionally diverse rather than southern-centric. We wrote together over Zoom during the Covid years or occasionally in my outside office with the doors wide open. Helen was facing a cancer diagnosis and her first round of chemotherapy at this time, but rather than turning inward, she threw herself into the project with enthusiasm and energy.

Helen also found a spiritual home with the HA and I know that her work with the Secondary Committee, which she eventually chaired, her blog [onebighistorydepartment](#) and her work on the History Teacher Development Programme is where many of the readers of *Teaching History* might have first met her.

During the last decade of her life, Helen also extended her reach into Europe and became a much-valued colleague in the EuroClio team. 'How do you history teachers all know each other?' a colleague remarked to me the other day. The answer is, partially, Helen. Helen was so often the glue that bound us together.

A few months before her death, Helen was still fired up about history projects and was starting new projects involving GRT histories and climate change history.

It is here I have to stop, just as Helen's life was so abruptly stopped when her cancer returned. She was my inspirational colleague and my dear friend and I am honoured to have known her. Her death has left a huge hole in my life and the lives of many of my friends and colleagues. But, as she used to joke, you have to KBO (keep bugging on). Keep making new connections and revelling in the joy of history teaching. Keep being excited about learning more history. Keep supporting and looking after each other in our networks. If we can keep doing this, then it will be a fitting tribute to her memory.

Ruth Lingard is Head of Humanities at Millthorpe School, York and a CA tutor on the University of York PGCE.