

LEARNING TO ENGAGE WITH DOCUMENTS THROUGH ROLE PLAY

— Hilary Cooper

Introduction

First let me say that I did not research the materials used or plan this lesson. For this I must acknowledge, with thanks, that this is the work of my colleague, Mike Huggins, and the senior assistant archivist in the Cumbrian Record office, Margaret Owen. However, I subsequently taught this lesson on several occasions. I modified it, as teachers do, and interpreted the material in my own way, relishing the role I created for myself as 'Old Sally'. I was profoundly impressed by the intellectual and emotional involvement of the Year 5/6 pupils. And the great thing was that they were engaging with old documents, for a purpose, and involved in genuine historical enquiry, through discussion.

The role play

Setting the scene

The class are waiting for the teacher to arrive. Their chatter is interrupted by tremendous banging on the door. Silence. Slowly someone opens the door. In comes a bent old woman with a stick, wearing a long, black dress and ragged, woven shawl around her head and shoulders. Shock – then laughter. They recognise the teacher. But... they are reprimanded. She is Old Sally from up the fell. So they listen.

Sally draws their attention to a large drawing of a stone stuck on the wall. It is from a Cumbrian church. On it is written:

'Pestis fuit Ao 1598 unde moriebantur apud Kendal 2,500, Richmond 2200, Penrith 2266, Kariol 1196'.

Children eventually recognise local town names and numbers but what was this about? They must go back in time to the year 1598 to find out.

Who are you?

Sally says that she thinks she recognises a lot of them from market days. She gives each child an enlarged photocopy of a name taken from the parish register of the local church. Like the rest of the documents it has been selected by the archivist in the record office, who has chosen first names they might recognise (The second names are more difficult to read).

Sally moves around the room, recognising these people, and asking them if they are indeed Richard Parke, Richard Robinson, Nicholas Monetyes, John Walker, Bernard Mylner, Jennett Shaw, Margaret Bulfell, Agness Wariner, Margaret Postilthwaite and so on, helping them to identify the letters in their names which confirm this. Sally wonders whether they are literate enough to copy their names, in this strange script. Children, in groups, compare each other's names,

compare and contrast letters, building up a repertoire of letter recognition skills for looking at documents later, written in a similar hand, some of which would contain their names.

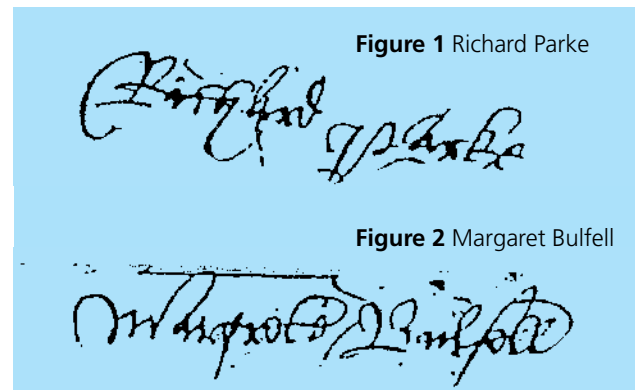


Figure 1 Richard Parke

Figure 2 Margaret Bulfell

Our town?

Sally gives each group a copy of a sixteenth century map of the town in 1614, showing the river, the fell, the familiar names of many of the streets in the town, the inn, the market place, all still there, and the school, the church, the mill, the castle, houses scattered along the main streets. Since so much is familiar they are able to slowly decipher the writing in the key and find, for example, the mill, Dockway Hall, Stramondgate, the free school.

Figure 3 Speed Map of Kendal, 1614



Figure 4 Woodcut of Tudor shepherd



What job do you do?

Each group is given an identical set of laminated photocopies of Tudor woodcuts and paintings showing occupations in Tudor times. From these each group make a list of jobs that they might have: distributors (who would purchase locally then sell elsewhere), carriers, mercers (dealing in groceries and clothing), metal workers, leather workers, farmers, butchers, candle makers, dyers, metal workers, textile workers (tenters, fullers, weavers), church workers (priest, clerk, grave digger) and publicans. There were 46 ale houses, a tavern and 17 inns in Kendal in 1577. The children are asked to group the occupations, which requires discussion and scrutiny.

They are given a table showing freemen in guilds in Kendal in 1578, which provides evidence that these occupations existed in Kendal. The children decide on their occupation – which for many of the women was unpaid work.

Where do you live?

'Now remind me where you live,' says Sally 'and write your name on the map to remind me. I'm getting very forgetful these days'. She circulates, talking to these 'Kendal folk' about where they live and why and the work they do. She goes with them to the market – a large picture of a

Figure 5 Woodcut of Tudor tailor's workshop



Tudor market was projected on the wall. She talks to the 'townspeople' about market day and invites them to share the sort of gossip they have when they meet in the market, moving amongst them to cue, extend and question.

Creating a purpose for reading the documents

Sally, who lives 'up on' fell', sympathises with the Kendal people. It is 1598 and harvests have been bad for several years. 'And' she adds dramatically, 'now the carrier has just brought news from the Queen's Court at Westminster, that the pestilence is again stalking the land'. She describes the stories he told her of how it may start with just normal



Figure 6 Grave diggers

head ache or a cold, but can then develop into a 'burning ague, with bloody issue from the black bulboes' and that it might be brought to Kendal by strangers passing through. The 'Kendal folk', horrified, debate whether they should protect themselves by closing the market and the church, the advantages and disadvantages (involving them in the real decisions people had to make, at the time). These discussions again allow Sally to feed in information, respond to questions and misconceptions. A group of townfolk meet to make the final decision – that both must be closed.

September 1598

Sally is very concerned. Now the pestilence is rife in Kendal with many dead over the past three months. She asks what is to be done with the bodies. The church yard is full. Future graves may have to be dug where people have already been buried. Graves may be desecrated. The Kendal people make many suggestions, which they argue over in groups.

Then Sally says that this is just one of their problems. 'What is to be done with those who become ill? Many of the people here have relatives and friends who have been, or might become ill. Some will survive but many will die.' Many thoughtful suggestions are made: a special building on the fell side for those with symptoms, clearing an area of the town for the ill, feeding people through a window, those who recover looking after the sick...

After discussing these issues in groups the townfolk meet together to make the final decisions.

December 1598

Deaths recorded in Parish Register: Margaret Bulfell, Richard Parke, a daughter of Richard Robinson, Margaret Postilthwaite, Bernard Mylner

Sally shows the Kendal folk the most recent entry in the Parish Register. Gradually they recognise the names and some realise that with real shock that some of them, who by now have become real characters, are dead. Everyone is silent.

And others of the group, who live beyond Stramondgate Bridge, have died too: Agness Warriner, Jennet Shawe, Sybil Warriner, Bryan Warriner and Nicholas Warriner's two daughters. This really shocks everyone (Some of them are dead!)

January/February 1599

By now half the population is dead. In January, Nicholas Monetyes and Thomas Doddinges lose children and in February a horse dealer is found dying on the fell (near Sally's house). But the plague deaths have almost ceased. Sally and the parishioners go to church to join in a prayer of thanksgiving.

They listen to the sermon of Richard Leake, vicar of Killington, near Kendal, which has powerful religious imagery, a sense that the pestilence was sent by God as a punishment for wickedness and a feeling of great relief that the plague is over and they must all live better lives in future.

At this point there was total silence and to my amazement several of Kendal's remaining 'inhabitants' were in tears.

Examining the documents

After a break the children were now sufficiently involved in the story to want to know what decisions the community

had actually made. The archivist and Sally, now reverted to teacher, helped them to find out from the documents. Extracts from these were photocopied and shown as Powerpoint slides.

Parish Register

The Parish Register had a gap between August 1598 and Christmas Day 1598. The purpose of the register for recording baptisms, marriages and deaths was explained. Children made sensible suggestions as to why there was a gap.

Corporation document – clerk's evidence

This is a single sheet document which is 'a true note taken from the clerke of Kendall church mencioninge the nommer of thise which dyed of the infectious syknes...this Tenthe of Marche 1598, before Mr. Edward Wilkinson'. It lists the total number of dead in Stramondgate and beyond Stramondgate, in two columns. The children again could recognise some of their names, some street names, from present day Kendal and from the map. The archivist asked why the children thought the document had been written, then explained that it may have been an attempt to have the market reopened in spite of rumours that the plague was returning. In fact, during the plague a temporary unofficial market had been opened on nearby Hay Fell.

Borough chamberlain's accounts – monies paid

This document was used to find the answer to the third question the children had discussed, how to cope with the large numbers of dead. It included, for example:

Item paid to Robert Fisher and Ned Harrison for viewing corpse ...xxiid;
Item paid for shapes and stables and locks to the house of the infected ones vii d.

So this showed that a special house had been set up on the fell for those with the plague. The children needed more help in reading it because the vocabulary is more wide-ranging.

Penrith inscription

This was the starting point of the role play. The children were now confident in interpreting the Latin: the date was 1598, 'pestis' was the pestilence or plague, and the number of deaths in Kendal was 2,500. However the archivist explained that Tudor figures 1 and 2 were similar, so the number was probably more like 1,500.

Conclusion

I have worked on other projects with our local librarians and archivists, who have been not just essential in identifying appropriate documents related to an enquiry, but keen also to work with me, students and pupils in school. I urge you to work with them and benefit from their local archives and their skills. For clearly a similar case study could be replicated in most places and in relation to other periods in the British Isles, by novice history teachers, with their support. And it certainly makes local experiences of national events alive and meaningful, be it, for example, the opening of the local railway line or particular incidents during the two world wars,

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