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Putting the local community at the heart of the Key Stage 3 history curriculum: Copleston High School

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Brief description

The Key Stage 3 history curriculum is distinctive and highly imaginative. It meets students' needs, aspirations and interests exceptionally well, and twice as many students opt to study history in Key Stage 4 than is seen nationally. This is principally because the curriculum ensures that students have an excellent understanding of history's relevance to their own lives by providing them with a detailed insight into how the local community fits into a wider national and international history framework.

Overview – the school's message

'History teaching at Copleston is exciting, creative and successful. Whenever I have visitors in school, I always make sure that we go to history lessons because I know that the teaching will be stimulating and the students will be interested. The school is fortunate to have an excellent history department with a team of very able teachers who are very well led.

The teachers are visionary and they have developed an inspirational and engaging curriculum at Key Stage 3 which places a particular focus on how the local community fits into British and World History. Students enjoy studying history because it is relevant to them. We know this because they tell us and a very high proportion of students choose history at GCSE and A level. The teachers are also self-reflective and are always trying to ensure that students have a very rich and fulfilling experience. This all helps to make history such a successful subject.'

‘Quite simply the history we teach is built around our students and we use local stories to reveal the bigger picture’.

Shaun Common, Headteacher

The good practice in detail

History is the most popular optional subject at GCSE with two in every three students choosing to take it. And results are improving in external examinations at GCSE and A level. This success is due to three key factors, namely:

- the good and outstanding teaching which students receive
- strong and determined leadership
- an outstanding curriculum.

Students benefit from teachers' exceptional dedication and first-class subject expertise. Teachers are constantly striving to find ways to improve their practice to ensure that lessons are engaging, challenging and varied. Relationships between staff and students are excellent, not least because students recognise the time and commitment their teachers devote to preparing high-quality lessons. As a result, students make good progress in Key Stage 3, and some make outstanding progress. They develop excellent knowledge and understanding of local, national and international history and have a sophisticated understanding of how the past fits together. Students are also very skilled in using historical evidence to support their judgements about the past.

As a result of highly effective and sensitive leadership, the history teachers form a cohesive unit. They work extremely well together, willingly sharing lesson ideas, resources and examples of best practice. The department benefits from the expertise of two advanced skills teachers, whose work resonates across the department and in the wider school and local community. There is also an immersive learning area which allows teachers and students to break out of teaching rooms and use a wide range of resources, particularly digital ones.

The key to history's success in this school is the innovative nature of the outstanding Key Stage 3 curriculum. It is a model of excellent practice and ensures that students have a good understanding of how the history of the local community fits into wider British, European and World history. It has been informed by teachers' determination that history should be meaningful and relevant to all groups of students. Their commitment to recognising, interrogating and celebrating the diversity of the local community is exemplified by the way in which diversity is explored throughout work covered in Years 7 to 9. The curriculum is also underpinned by challenging, intriguing and controversial questions. These help create a clear sense of purpose in lessons and ensure that learning in history is informed by a strong sense of historical enquiry. Students also benefit from an excellent range of trips, visits and other enrichment activities which are integrated into the curriculum extremely well.

‘...engaging curriculum at Key Stage 3 which places a particular focus on how the local community fits into British and World History’

The curriculum at Key Stage 3

The curriculum at Key Stage 3 emanates from developments over the last three years and especially since the changes to the programmes of study in 2008. Neal Watkin is an advanced skills teacher in history at the school and was previously head of history. He says, 'During the last three years we have had the opportunity to make the curriculum more exciting. We asked students what they wanted to do and they were very clear: more local

history and investigations which give a more positive view of minority groups. We also wanted to reflect the very diverse population in the school. So we centred our revised curriculum on the students' experiences and included much more local history'.

The curriculum which has evolved provides students with excellent opportunities to develop their historical knowledge through learning about, and understanding, important aspects of local, national and world events. Opportunities to study different themes and issues across time are combined with well-planned in-depth studies to ensure that students develop a sophisticated and wide-ranging understanding of history and why studying it matters. Furthermore, topics are studied sequentially in each year thus embedding and strengthening students' chronological understanding. Finally, the focus in all history lessons is on well-structured enquiry questions which enable the students to investigate, solve problems, be resourceful and, above all, find things out for themselves. For Roberto Iacobucci, the current head of history, 'Quite simply the history we teach is built around our students and we use local stories to reveal the bigger picture'.

The curriculum is dynamic, constantly being refreshed and reinvigorated. For Roberto this means, 'always looking for other local angles because it is the local connection which makes all the difference'.

The curriculum structure at Key Stage 3



Students actively engaged in a history topic

In each of the three years, a key overarching question links all the topics studied in that year. In Year 7, the enquiry is focused on 'How and why has Ipswich changed since Saxon times?' In Year 8, the key question is 'Did Britons win their rights through violence or reasoning?' In Year 9, the enquiry looks at 'How should we remember the 20th century?' In these ways, each year focuses on a particular theme, and moves from local history in Year 7 to national history in Year 8 and international history in Year 9.

Each year concludes with an activity which draws together the work undertaken throughout the year. At the end of Year 7, students undertake work on 'Marketing Ipswich' and have to produce a town trail which highlights the key historical features and developments in the town's history. The end-of-year unit in Year 8 takes up the students' conclusions to the overarching question and links them to work on the Suffragettes. The enquiry question for Year 8 focuses on whether Britons won their rights through violent or peaceful means. Having come to a conclusion on the work covered, students look at the Suffragettes to test out their conclusion, focus on 'How far did violence help the Suffragette cause?' and thus have an opportunity to refine what they had previously decided. Key Stage 3 concludes in the summer term of Year 9 with students working in groups to produce a documentary film on an important theme of the 20th century and to exemplify their view on what the 20th century means to them. This links directly with the overarching question of how the 20th century should be remembered.

The activities undertaken by the students also have, in Neal Watkin's words, 'real outcomes', for example, the marketing leaflet for Ipswich, the films on 20th century themes which are to be shown at the Ipswich Film Club, and the students' proposed commemorations for

Thomas Clarkson. Neal says, 'When students and teachers know that the outcome of their work is to be used by a museum, a website or an outside company, it makes the teaching and the learning much more exciting because you know it is going to be valued and referred to over and over again.'

The importance of local history in Year 7

‘We need to know what happened from as many different people as possible so that we can complete the jigsaw. Otherwise we have gaps and that’s not right.’

Nationally local history is being increasingly ignored, but in this school it is central to the curriculum in Year 7 and it is at the heart of explaining the success and popularity of the subject.

Throughout the year, each half-term topic is rooted in a local theme. For example, the enquiry on 'How did the Norman invasion affect Suffolk?' centres on an investigation of nearby Framlingham Castle. Through research on why the castle was built, when it was built and where it was built, students move on to see to what extent the experience of this part of Suffolk was representative of what happened elsewhere in England. In this way the local community experience is used as a micro study – how was this part of Suffolk affected – of a macro issue – how was England affected as a whole. This opportunity

for students to move seamlessly from local history to national history and back to local history again goes far to explaining why the curriculum in this school helps to strengthen students' chronological understanding.

All the units are devised in the same way, and in their work on 'How successful was Elizabeth at overcoming the problems she faced?' students again begin with a local perspective. In this case, it is Elizabeth's progress to Kentwell Hall in Suffolk. An enquiry into what happened on the royal progress, and more importantly why she made it, broadens out to look at the problems Elizabeth had to deal with and the extent to which she overcame them. Again the students move from the local event to the national scene, shaping and reshaping their views as their enquiries develop.



Students visit the Thomas Clarkson memorial

In the case of Thomas Clarkson, the students interrogate not only the local impact of his work but also his national and international importance. Thomas Clarkson's contribution to the movement for the abolition of the slave trade has been to a large extent eclipsed by his better known colleague, William Wilberforce. However, Clarkson played a pivotal role in arguing the case for abolition. Now, though, the students are not only linking from the local to the national scene but also to the international landscape. The students look at how famous people are remembered, focus on how Clarkson has been commemorated and finally consider how he should be commemorated. They develop trenchant views on his importance and much disgust at the inadequacy, in their view, of his current commemoration. As one student commented, 'More people need to be aware of Thomas Clarkson and what he did and it is up to us, the young people, to do that.'

In this way, history is brought to life; the emphasis on the local community means that the work has immediacy and is relevant and meaningful. The approach taken effectively develops students' knowledge and understanding of topics in depth. Yet it also strengthens students' overview of developments across time, their appreciation of the links between topics and their grasp of an increasingly complex chronology.

Although local history is central in Year 7, it is also integrated into topics studied in Years 8 and 9 and the curriculum is peppered with references to the local context. For example, in Year 8, students study the civil war in East Anglia. In Year 9, the themes of how conflicts should be remembered are focused on the part played by the Suffolk and the Royal Anglian Regiments both in the two World Wars and since 1945.



Students on a field trip

Exploring diversity

Putting the local community at the heart of the history curriculum at Key Stage 3 has also led to a detailed study of issues of diversity throughout the units covered. While the large majority of students at the school are of White British heritage, the department is keenly aware that some students are not. They are determined that history should be highly relevant to everyone in the school and this is reflected in a curriculum which ensures that issues regarding diversity are built into the curriculum rather than treated as tokenistic additions. Diversity is woven into the fabric of the curriculum in each year and is explored in all its forms. For Rosie Sheldrake, the other advanced skills teacher in history in the school, diversity is 'essential. Without it history is incomplete. It is about individuals and it enriches the topics we study. So we look at diversity of gender, race, class, nationality, religion, and migration, making sure that we give the full story.' Students are also aware of the importance of investigating history from as many different angles as possible. As one said, 'We need to know what happened to as many different people as possible so that we can complete the jigsaw. Otherwise we have gaps and that's not right.'

The work on diversity is brought together in Year 9 with a separate project on the 'Ipswich Caribbean Experience' as part of the general enquiry question, 'How should the 20th century be remembered?' Students engage in a project to save the Ipswich Caribbean Association building. As part of this study, they explore migration through time and the impact of the Caribbean community on Ipswich as well as the impact of Ipswich on the Caribbean community itself. Again it is a local perspective which leads the students to investigate a broader issue, from the experience of the Ipswich Caribbean community to the wider theme of migration at a national and international level. Students find this unit fascinating, not least because they come to understand much more why people are so prepared to move across the world no matter what the difficulties. It also has had another rather surprising outcome. 'Students can be disparaging about where they live', says Rosie, 'but after this project many learn to love the town a little more'.

For Roberto Iacobucci and all his colleagues the curriculum has brought greater levels of engagement and motivation among students. As a result of this work, more families, most of whom have children at the school, are visiting Christchurch Mansion in Ipswich, the focus of

a unit in Year 7 on religious changes in Tudor England, and Playford Churchyard, just outside the town, where Thomas Clarkson was buried. For Rosie Sheldrake, 'History is opening students' eyes on their surroundings' and Roberto adds, 'Students are taking greater pride in what they do because they see it as important'.

By the end of Year 9, students not only have a detailed grasp of the topics and themes they have studied but also an in-depth understanding of why history matters to them. The exemplary curriculum at Key Stage 3 ensures that they can confidently articulate the place history has in their own lives, in society and in the modern world. In the words of one student, 'The history we study helps you to see where you fit in and why we do what we do'. Another agreed and added, 'Yes, and I now know who I am'.

The school's background

Copleston High School is a mixed comprehensive school for students aged 11 to 18. The proportion of students eligible for free meals has declined and is now significantly below the national average. There are fewer pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities than the national average, although an average number of students have a statement of special educational needs. Most of the students are white British but there is a significant number of minority ethnic students and some students for whom English is not their first language. The school has Specialist Sports College status. It works closely with other schools in the area, including sharing the sixth form provision with other secondary schools, and is involved in providing training programmes for new teachers.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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