

Real Historians series



Nicole Ridley is a teacher of History, Sociology and a Subject Lead for PSHE



What was your education?

I did my undergraduate in History at Royal Holloway, University of London, and a masters in Contemporary History at the University of Edinburgh. I eventually trained to teach with a history specialism at the University of York under an incredible team of subject specialists, who were invaluable in shaping my approach to school history and the understanding of its purpose and personality. I feel very lucky to have been trained by them.

What is your occupation?

I am a teacher of History, Sociology and a Subject Lead for PSHE in my school, which is a state comprehensive in Hull for students between 11-16.

What do you love about history?

Honestly, I fell in love with history when I fell in love with Eric Bana, playing Prince Hector. I had to know everything about him so I researched Troy, the war, Agamemnon, and it spiralled. Now, I still get very excited by slotting information together like a jigsaw. It's so satisfying when a pattern, a story, or a research project finally comes together and you can see the whole, complex picture laid out like the universe in front of you. I tell the students, when I'm feeling dramatic, that history is the closest you can come to predicting the future.

Why does history matter in the world?

History teaches critical thinking and analysis which is essential to navigate the modern world but it also keeps us humble. It can remind us of our mistakes, our vulnerabilities, but also our incredible power to create and shape the direction of society and communities. It can show the reality of slow progress and that the actions of individuals can have a direct impact on the world we live in.



What piece of work are you most proud of and why

The work that I've done on women in the [American West](#) started as CPD because I didn't enjoy teaching the course and I didn't know enough about the topic to do it well. I noticed then that there was a large gap in the narrative and I decided to fill it to make a point, but I'm really proud of how far the project has come since then and now I think that the passion I feel for it isn't indignation but borne out of its importance for history and the students. I've learnt a lot about how and why you should diversify and I think I've grown as a teacher because of it. I'm so pleased to share it with others and to be part of the discussion about diversifying our offer to students.

What do you think is most important for students to learn about in class today?

History is eternally relevant to the shape of our country today but arguments about who we are and where we are going often misuse history, so it's important that in any time period students study the historical roots of current debates if they are to actively take part and contribute. However, I do think that there are boundaries to what should be attempted in the history classroom and that there is a vital link between history departments and PSHE curriculums that could be enhanced to expose students to their contemporary history and historical relevance in the present day.

Do you think there are any individuals or periods in time that you think should be studied or given more time to?

History can give a voice to the voiceless and forgotten, so whomever they are and whoever they are, they should be given the time and space. One of the biggest drivers of my research has been to include the names of women that don't deserve to be forgotten when we study the development of America and I couldn't believe that even in the published work of a popular historian "wife" was regularly used as a name. For me, people like Lizzie E Johnson and her cattle business and Miranda Galpin and her political negotiations are fascinating and they bring new life and character to the period. They have their equivalents in every period that we can bring into lessons.

Do you think it's important to diversify the history curriculum?

Attempts to diversify are about inclusivity and equality, and I think it's important for history departments to take an ideological stand as a message to its students about what we expect from education, policy,



and the discipline of history in the present day. However, it's also about accuracy - without diversifying, the history we are teaching is not accurate. It feels like the teaching profession is in a really positive place when it comes to recognising active interpretations and breaking them down. I've definitely been inspired by the colossal amounts of work that have been going on in the past few years to deconstruct, decolonise, and rebuild the narratives we are presenting to our students. Between teachers of different specialisms, we have covered a lot of ground.

What would you say to students thinking about taking their history studies further?

The deeper into history you go, the richer and more fascinating it gets. Interdisciplinary history can open up so many other avenues of thought and analysis, and will help you see the world through different lenses. All of it is yours to navigate and explore.

If you could go back in time, where would you take yourself and why?

I would love to experience the sheer euphoria outside Buckingham Palace on VE Day but I think that to truly feel that, you'd also have to experience the terror and the loss, which I do not wish to live through. Therefore, I'd like to go to dinner with David Low and spend the whole time coming up with new and super sarcastic ways to draw politicians.

Which historical site in the UK is your favourite and why?

I love anywhere with an epic staircase - royal, old, or otherwise - but there is a very special place in my heart for the Roman fort of Vindolanda because I feel like it connects me to my childhood, my family, and our history.

Gatehouse reconstruction at Vindolanda Roman fort. (c) 123rf.com / jaimepharr

