

Real Historians series



"History is full of stories which can inspire, shock and move us. By learning about our forebears, their struggles and triumphs, their ingenuity and, most of all, their humanity, we can learn a huge amount about ourselves."

- Cathy Murphy



Cathy Murphy,
Education lead for
[The Vikings UK](#)

What was your education?

I studied History GCSE and then studied RE and languages, leading to a theology degree. I think the common theme with my interests was human experience and the way people have coped with the challenges life has thrown at them.

What is your occupation?

I'm now a teacher. I run my own business bringing history to life for primary school children. I take objects and costumes into schools and try to bring the past to life for them. In my other job, I teach teachers to provide high quality PSHE lessons. For me, the connection is about enabling children to understand the world and their place in it.

Since I was 18 I have been a historical re-enactor, focusing on the Early Medieval period, Vikings and Saxons mainly. The society I'm part of, The Vikings, has over 1,500 members. This hobby has enabled me to travel all over the UK, and to Europe, to learn skills and crafts from the past and most of all to build many friendships with people with similar interests. I've been re-enacting for over 30 years and my children have grown up in the hobby as well.

What do you love about history?

We humans have developed over millennia to love stories. History is full of stories which can inspire, shock and move us. By learning about our forebears, their struggles and triumphs, their ingenuity and, most of all, their humanity, we can learn a huge amount about ourselves.



Why does history matter in the world?

We need to understand what has gone before so we can understand our current situation. I don't just mean the big, political events, but also development of technology, civil society and how we achieved the freedoms we take for granted now.

What piece of work are you most proud of and why?

I am most proud of a pair of Viking Socks I made. I started with the fleece cut from the sheep. I carded (combed) the wool and then felted the socks. It gave me a real sense of achievement to make something wearable completely from the raw materials. This is something that, 1,000 years ago, our ancestors would have done every day. I really enjoyed recapturing some of that.

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

I think it is really important for students to be able to grasp how ordinary people lived in whatever period they are studying. The big political events are important and interesting, but for students to be able to relate to people from the past and understand their lives, they need to study farmers, peasants, migrants, coal miners, weavers, factory workers...

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

It is often said that history is written by the victors. In Anglo-Saxon England, which is my period of special interest, those victors were usually churchmen who ignored or perhaps even wrote women out of the historical record – just look at the lack of evidence we have left of Aethelflead, Lady of the Mercians! For that reason I think we should be doing our best to seek out and emphasise the stories of all those who have been ignored in the record and bring them to the fore. In a similar vein, I think we need to ensure that children understand that our country has always been a melting pot of people coming from all over the world. People have always migrated here. No one group has the sole right to Englishness.



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

Yes, most definitely. We need to ensure that we recognise the role of women, people of colour, LGBT+ people and all those who don't get the headlines in a traditional history textbook. We must however, not fall into the trap of only repeating the struggles and injustices experienced by these groups, but recognise their positive contributions and the ways that many had a positive effect on the future.

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

When choosing what to study, I would always urge someone to study something that they are interested in. If you love history then 'Go for it!'. You'll learn plenty of skills along the way which will be helpful to you in whatever path your life takes career wise.

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

I would like to go back to the year 878, when King Alfred and Guthrum, the Viking leader from East Anglia, made an agreement to divide our land into an area controlled by Alfred and an area controlled by the Danes, the Danelaw. I would be fascinated to hear what was said and whether Alfred really was as far sighted and generous as we often think him to have been. It was a crucial moment in our country's history. Perhaps if it wasn't for Alfred, the Vikings would have kept on raiding Wessex and we'd be living in Daneland not England!

Anglo Saxon huts at west stow.(c) Shutterstock / Laura E Carey





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

One of my favourite re-enactment events every year is a visit to West Stow Anglo Saxon village near Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk. For the last 20 or so years I spent a week living in the reconstructed houses there, cooking the sorts of food they would have eaten and spending the days doing crafts like leather working and felting. For the last 15 years I've been taking my children there too and they love it as much as I do. Part of the reason it is so special is that the reconstructed houses are built on the spot where a village stood 1500 years ago. You really feel as if you are walking in the footsteps of the Angles.

[Find out more about The Vikings UK](#)

