

Celebrating International Women's Day and Women's History Month through the history curriculum

Introduction

Mao Zedong, the communist leader of China, when trying to change traditional attitudes of Chinese society towards women, once famously said, 'Women hold up half of the sky.' Do women hold up half of your curriculum? How well represented are they in the significant individuals you look at? And are the women you choose good role models? Of course, some women are very familiar – Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole, Boudicca, perhaps Queen Elizabeth [I and II] and Queen Victoria, Emily Davidson and Emily Pankhurst. But could we do better? International Women's Day gives us a perfect opportunity to audit our curriculum and think about the subliminal messages we give out.

This rapid survey through most of the history study units cannot, and does not, hope to do justice to the many women who have played a significant part in history. However, here are some examples of women you might consider including in the history curriculum:

History unit	Possible individual to study
Stone Age	Red Lady of Paviland
Shang	Fu Hao
Ancient Egypt	Nefertiti Hatshepsut Cleopatra
Ancient Greece	Agnodice of Athens
Roman Britain	Woman gladiator, London
Baghdad	Zubayda
Vikings	Emma of Normandy
Anglo Saxons	Abbess Hilda of Whitby Lady Godiva
Maya	Lady K'abel
Benin	Iyoba Idia
Early Modern England	Lady Johanna St John

The Red Lady of Paviland (Wales)

Let's start with the Red Lady of Paviland, who, confusingly, turns out not to be a woman at all but a man wearing a necklace of shells! In 1823 a vicar came across a skeleton while on an archaeological dig in the Gower Peninsula, Wales. He thought the remains were those of a woman, painted in red ochre, hence the name, dating from the Roman period. The truth, discovered more recently by radio-carbon dating, is that the incomplete skeleton is around 33,000 years old and that of a young male. It is not always easy to identify the sex of an individual from an incomplete skeleton. You can find out more about the Red Lady of Paviland in the BBC series for KS2, 'Ancient Voices'. You might use the Red Lady of Paviland to discuss the reliability of evidence.

Nefertiti, Hatshepsut, Cleopatra, Fu Hao (Egypt and China)

In Ancient Civilisations, you might choose Nefertiti, Hatshepsut or even Cleopatra, who was the last pharaoh of Egypt, and provides a link to the Roman Empire and Julius Caesar, all of whom might be familiar to you. If you study the Shang Dynasty, you really ought to focus on Fu Hao, a powerful ruler and army leader from around 1200 BC. Much of what we know about the Shang – their crafts, their weapons, their gods, their clothes – comes from the artefacts found in her grave, excavated since 1976. So far it is the only royal Shang Dynasty tomb found that still contained all its burial goods, thus allowing us to find out about this remarkable woman and her life. You might use the artefacts found in her tomb to build a picture of life in Shang times. What can the artefacts in her grave tell us about life at the time? What can't they tell us?

Agnodice of Athens (Greece)

In Ancient Greece in the 4th century BC, Agnodice of Athens became the first female doctor. She dressed as a man in order to train (women were allowed to be midwives, but not doctors). She was so successful that she was accused of seducing the women of Athens; to prove otherwise, she stripped in front of a jury of men and won her case. There is some conjecture about the truth of this story – it may or may not be true – but Agnodice did exist and did work successfully as a doctor at a time when it was an all-male profession. You might use Agnodice to explore Greek medicine and its legacy to us, but also to ask why it was so difficult for her, and other women, to become a doctor at that time. You might contrast her experience with that of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and her struggles to become a doctor in Victorian England.

Woman gladiator (England)

In 1996, archaeologists in London discovered what they believe to be a unique grave in Roman Europe – that of a female gladiator (though some historians disagree). Women did fight in the amphitheatre, and there is written evidence to support this from Pompeii, but no other known grave. You might discuss the role of women in Ancient Rome using the female

gladiator, or you might ask about the significance of the grave – as we have already said, it is the only one found [so far] throughout the Roman Empire.

Zubayda (Iraq)

There are also examples of powerful and influential women from non-European society. From Baghdad, Zubayda who died in AD 831, was said to be the richest and most powerful woman in the world at the time. Famous for her wisdom and good works, she was responsible for, and funded, a series of way-stations and wells all the way from Baghdad to Mecca, thus making it easier and safer to make the Haj, or Pilgrimage to Mecca, that each Muslim is expected to perform during their lifetime. You could use Zubayda to research life in Baghdad, what it was like to go on a Haj at the time, and compare it with what it is like today. You could also consider the impact her work had at the time, and how it has been viewed since.

Emma of Normandy (England, Denmark and Norway)

Emma of Normandy was the wife of Æthelred the Unready and, when he died, became the wife of the Viking King Canute – so at one time she was Queen of England, Denmark and Norway. She played an important part in uniting the country and, when Canute died, her Saxon son from her first marriage, Edward the Confessor, became King. It was her Norman connection that was part of the claim for William the Conqueror in 1066. She was indeed a powerful and influential lady. You could use the story of Emma to explore what happened to rich ladies when they became widows – how easy was it for them to make a life for themselves? Why was Canute so keen to marry her – was it because of who she was?

Abbess Hilda of Whitby (England)

Abbess Hilda of Whitby founded, and became the head of, a large mixed monastery in the seventh century. Her learning was famous throughout Europe, and kings and others sought her advice readily. She chaired the Synod (church meeting) at Whitby in AD 664 where the divisions in the Church were ironed out, and everyone agreed to adhere to the rules of the Pope in Rome. She was made a saint after her death, and St Hilda's College in Oxford is named after her. Abbess Hilda provides a great opportunity to discuss the role of the church in Saxon times, the work of monasteries and abbeys, and particularly how difficult it was for a single woman to support herself. You might research Hilda's life and discover why she was made a saint, and the part played by saints in the life of the Anglo-Saxon church.

Lady Godiva (England)

Or you might study Lady Godiva, the wife of the Earl of Mercia, who asked her husband to reduce the heavy taxes he was charging the people of Coventry. He agreed, as long as she rode naked through the streets. He never thought she would, but she did, clothed only in her long hair (or, in some versions of the story, her undergarments). The people of Coventry, so

the legend goes, were so grateful to her that they all, apart from 'peeping' Tom, stayed indoors and turned their backs on her. Tom, for his sins, was turned to stone! Unfortunately, most of this story is untrue, dating from at least the 13th century, rather than the 11th century, but Lady Godiva was a real person, who is mentioned in the Domesday Book and is one of the few Anglo-Saxons landholders to keep land after the Norman invasion – she must have been rich, powerful and influential. You could use the story of Lady Godiva to explore life in Anglo-Saxon towns – there were some, although they were much smaller than today. You might also try to separate 'fact' from 'fiction' in the story of Lady Godiva, asking when [and why] it was first written down. You could then explore the part played by myth and legend in history.

Lady K'abel (Guatemala)

Lady K'abel was a Maya queen and military ruler from the Classical period of the Maya in the 7th century. Her tomb in Guatemala was only discovered in 2012. Her title of 'supreme warrior' meant she was more important than her husband the king. Archaeologists are still unsure of the facts, but her tomb, like that of Fu Hao, contained lots of artefacts that help us understand her life and times. It also shows us how new evidence can change the way we view things, by providing new information, or support for one theory as opposed to another, or simply adding to our understanding of life at the time. We know very few named individuals from Maya times, so it is quite exciting to have a named individual to study. Again, Lady K'abel offers a perfect opportunity to discuss her significance – both then and now.

Iyoba Idia (Benin)

Iyoba Idia from Benin was a famous warrior queen in the 16th century. She is someone you may never have heard of, but her face is one of the most famous bronzes and ivory masks on display in museums and collections around the world. You might use her to explore the role of women – and especially of royal women – in Benin. How was their life different from that of men? How easy was it for a queen to be powerful and influential at the time? And just why is her face on so many Benin bronzes?

Lady Johanna St John (England)

Lady Johanna St John (1631–1705) is perhaps typical of the local 'Lady of the Manor' and their role in healing the sick in England during the Middle Ages and Early Modern period. She lived at Lydiard House near Swindon, and combined her role of running a large household with compiling a recipe book of cures. She grew many of the herbs she needed in the walled garden of Lydiard House. It seems Lady Johanna 'collected' successful remedies from her London friends, often sending them to Lydiard House to be made up into medicines and sent back to London. This went well beyond dosing up servants on the estate with traditional family treatments.

Activities

1. Audit your curriculum.

Traditionally, textbooks focus on the rich and famous who, throughout history, tend to be men. Where might you change some of the individuals you use to reflect better the importance of women in society? What criteria might you use for including certain women? Should you include more women at the expense of, or as well as, men?

2. Review content.

Including more women instead of men might redress one issue, but does it just replace one 'bad practice' with another? How can we produce a curriculum that includes both men and women naturally, reflecting the way society works? What might be the impact of **not** doing this?

3. Set your pupils a challenge!

You could get them to look through their textbook and identify the women in illustrations. What are they doing? What image does this project? How many are there compared to men?

Or you could ask them to think about why women should be included in the curriculum:

- You could ask pupils to choose which woman from history we should celebrate on International Women's Day, for example sorting and ranking the stories above, and explaining their choice.
- Pupils could use criteria such as 'most memorable', 'made most impact at the time' and 'we can learn from them today' to guide their choices.
- You could ask pupils to research these, or other famous women from history, in more detail, then come up with a list of three women they think should be included in the curriculum.

Pupils could write a potted biography of each, and present them to the rest of the class.

Finally, you could ask the class to draft a letter to the book author[s] explaining why the people they have chosen should be included in a revision of the course textbook.

This resource was developed by The Historical Association for the Global Learning Programme (GLP) for England.