

## **Dig-ital Resource pack**

**Life and Death in Stoke Mandeville: Historic Text Analysis** (KS3 - KS4 /  
Secondary) (History/English)

## **LESSON INFO :**

A Key Stage 3-4 lesson in which students will act as History Detectives, looking through documents to uncover clues and evidence about life and death in Stoke Mandeville during the Tudor and Georgian periods (16-18th century).

This can act as an introduction to primary sources or build on knowledge already gained in KS2-3. Investigating historic documents and other primary sources helps students develop critical thinking and deductive reasoning skills. This also offers an interesting introduction to written English in the early modern period and the standardisation of spelling.

### **Objectives:**

- **Discuss primary sources - what are they, why are they useful - or not useful.**
- **Learn how to “read” a primary source, how to pick out important information.**
- **Explore the lives of the people in the documents and come up with questions about them which might need other primary sources or archaeological evidence to answer.**

### **Teacher objectives:**

Encourage students to think critically - but also to consider their personal responses, what thoughts or feelings do they have about the sources? Help students engage in a discussion of the sources, what details they can learn from them and how they might use these to learn more about the history of the local area. Identify questions for further investigation and develop strategies for how they might answer them

### **Students will**

Consider the usefulness of primary sources and gain a better understanding of how they are used in history and archaeology.

**Estimated time: 45 min**

## **Introduction**

Archaeologists are currently working on behalf of HS2 to excavate the ruins of St Mary's Church in Stoke Mandeville. They are uncovering a wealth of archaeology that will tell us more about the history and past communities of Stoke Mandeville. The church and churchyard of St. Mary's is one of the most important historical sites being investigated along the route, and we hope that the archaeological work will answer many questions about the building and its surrounding landscape.

The church of St Mary the Virgin was built in the late 11th century, shortly after the Norman Conquest in 1066. Unlike the modern church, also called St Mary's, the old church was not located in the centre of the village. Instead it stood in the middle of an agricultural landscape, on land owned by the bishop of Lincoln. Near to the church there were a number of other buildings, like barns and a mill. The mill is mentioned in the Domesday Book, which lists information about who owned land in England after the Norman Conquest.

The church was built in the bottom of a shallow valley, which was naturally very wet. People working the land in the medieval period took advantage of this, creating a number of artificial streams and ponds. These provided water to the nearby mill and were later used for growing watercress.

When the new church in the centre of Stoke Mandeville was opened in the late 1800s, St. Mary's fell into disrepair, although the churchyard continued to be used for burials until 1908. The ruins became dangerous and unstable, and the church was eventually demolished in 1966. In total the church and churchyard were used for over 800 years. The landscape around the church has evidence for even longer habitation. Excavations have also been taking place at the site of a Roman settlement to the east of the church, where buildings were arranged on either side of a central trackway. This settlement appears to have earlier Iron Age origins. High status Roman finds, such as a coin and decorated pottery, suggest that a Roman villa may have stood nearby.

As well as these packs for schools, we have a Field Museum on site, over a number of weekends over the summer. Inside the museum is a viewing platform giving a view of the ongoing excavations, as well as displays, films and interactives enabling you to explore the history of St. Mary's church and find out about archaeological discoveries in the area. Come and see the excavations, meet the archaeologists and find out more!

## **Learning Content: Primary Sources**

Historians use two types of sources to learn about the past: primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources are first-hand accounts of the event or topic, usually from people who had a direct connection to it. Secondary sources are usually written later than primary sources and by someone who was not there. Secondary sources add an extra layer of interpretation or analysis, but this can be biased or incorrect as the person is talking about something they did not personally experience.

Primary sources are really useful to historians and archaeologists because they can tell us a lot about the lives of people in the past, in their own words. However, it is important to think critically about primary sources, they are often incomplete and have little context. As well as reading the primary source, historians must research more widely about the time period, to understand what life was like for the person who wrote the document. They also look for other primary sources which talk about the same or similar events in order to decide how useful the source is.

Archaeologists use primary sources for a number of reasons. One reason is because it helps them identify artefacts which they excavate, which might not be used anymore, or might look very different today. They also use them to understand more about how a building was used or who lived in it - this might not always be obvious from the archaeological remains.

### **Discussion:**

#### **What are primary sources?**

There are many different types of primary sources. *Ask the class for examples. Draw a mind map or list of ideas on the classroom board from their answers.*

Examples of primary sources: letters, wills, census, church records, birth-marriage-death certificates, deeds, contracts, legal records, government records. Pupils will certainly come up with others.

*Ask the class these questions - open it up for discussion for about 5 minutes.*

#### **Where do we find primary sources?**

*Primary sources are usually found in archives. Many towns and cities, and all counties in the UK will have their own archives. An archive is a collection of records*

*and documents, but the term is also used for the location in which these records are kept. In the UK we also have The National Archives, which keeps some very important and old documents such as letters from kings and queens, as well as the Domesday book.*

*A very useful place to access primary sources for schools is through <https://www.docsteach.org/> from the National Archives.*

**What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of different sources?**

*Encourage students to think about how sources might be biased, as well as have information missing.*

## Introduction to Wills

A will is a legal declaration of a person's wishes for the division of their property or belongings (estate) after death. Most copies of wills which are still held by archives today date to the 1500s onwards. People were not required to make a will, but if they held property it was usually important as it meant the land would be passed down to their family or friends.

You can search for images of wills on the National Archives website, which contains wills dating back to the 1300s.

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/wills-1384-1858/>

*Students can download copies of the original wills to see how difficult they are to read. Highlight to students that this shows some of the weaknesses of the wills as primary sources. Special training is often required to be able to read them and the original documents are very fragile.*

From the late 1600s wills could be made by girls at the age of 12 and boys at the age of 14, as these were the legal ages at which they could get married. But many people did not know how to read and write at this time, therefore the wills were dictated to a clerk or lawyer who would write them out in a set format. It was not a legal requirement to make a will, therefore many people didn't. This is another weakness of wills as a primary source. In fact, before 1858 only 1 in 4 people in England made a will.

Many wills have been transcribed (typed up). This includes over 130 wills of people who lived in Stoke Mandeville from the 1500s-1800s, which have been published by the Buckinghamshire Records Society in 2019. Reading the wills can give us an interesting insight into the past, for example, they tell us what was important to the person and the society they lived in, it also gives us information about their life, their family and friends.

### Learning Activity:

The document you are working with has been transcribed from original wills. This means that they have been typed up, but the spelling has not been changed and you might even have some parts which are written in Latin rather than English. In order to use the document as a historical source, you need to extract the important information from it.

Carefully read your primary sources (can be in pairs or groups). What immediately stands out to you?

The language is probably very different from English today - this is because until 1755 spelling in England wasn't standardised, so people wrote everything phonetically. phonetic spelling means that it is written down how it is said, so If you are struggling to understand what is written in the document, try reading it aloud. There is also a glossary with each will.

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*Teacher's notes: Students should work in pairs or small groups and use the document recording sheet to create a record of the document. They might need to continue on another piece of paper. They can then share information about their wills, including ideas and interpretations, as a class - information about the year the will was written in could be found online or given by the teacher. Some of the wills are shorter than others, but still contain useful or interesting information. Groups can also discuss the benefits and difficulties of working with long and short primary sources.*

**Extension exercises:** An extension of this exercise would be for students to find out more about the time their will was written in, what was life like, what major events happened. Based on the will and the information they have researched, students could write about what life might have been like for the person who wrote the will - this could take the form of non-fiction or fiction writing.

**Historic Document Recording Sheet**

When is the document from?

What is it talking about?

Who do you think wrote the document?

Write one sentence summarising this document.

Why was it written? Quote evidence from the document that tells you this.

What does the person leave in their will?

Who did they leave things to?



What do you think this person's life was like? What job did they do? Were they wealthy?

Is there anything that surprised you in this document?

Are there any things you don't understand?

What could you use the evidence from this document for?

What was happening at the time in history this document was created?

What did you find out from this document that you might not learn anywhere else?

What other historical/archaeological evidence/documents could you use to gather more information about this?

**Conclusion:**

Ask your students to reflect on the work they have done during this workshop. If there was anything surprising or interesting they found out. How useful do they think wills are as primary sources?

Although a will was a legal document, it could also be very personal, showing which family members were favoured over others, or grudges about money owed! They remind us that the people who lived in the past might have had very different lives in terms of technology and opportunities, but we also probably have a lot in common with them.

**Homework ideas:**

- Research further the time period your will dates from. What were major events which occurred during this time. Can you find any historic maps which would show you what the area looked like? What would daily life have been like for the people who lived there?
- Use your background research and the work you have done in class for a piece of creative writing. Imagine you are one of the people mentioned in the will. How do you react to what you have been left? Is it fair or do you think you should have been left more? Or write from the perspective of the testor (the person who wrote the will).