

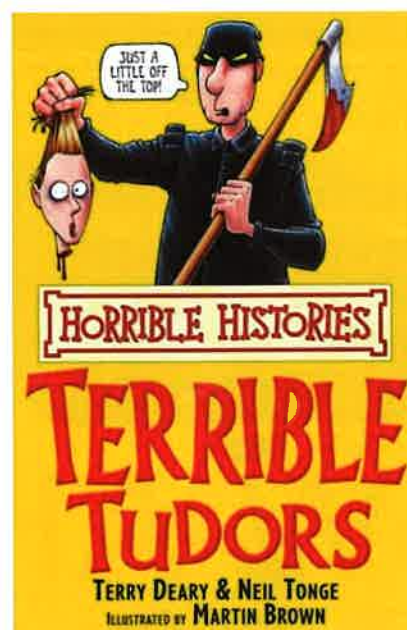
Using *Horrible History* to develop primary literacy and history

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What prompted the use of *Terrible Tudors*?

When I started planning for my Key Stage 2 literacy lessons last year, I wanted to link them to my history topic, the Tudors, and I also needed them to cover a significant amount of non-fiction English objectives, having focused on fiction and poetry texts in the previous term. One of the non-fiction books that came to my mind to help me with this task was Terry Deary's and Neil Tonge's *Terrible Tudors*. This article relates to the Tudors but the *Horrible History* portfolio is large and covers many relevant topics and periods. In our school, the Tudors are taught as part of local history.

When I first acquired the book, I flicked through the pages with reservation, not really expecting to find an abundance of suitable material to support either my English planning or history planning. I had never used a *Horrible History* book before. My only experience of them was from watching CBBC video snippets on the TV, and seeing their cartoon-illustrated brightly-coloured book covers in the shops. I was sceptical about using the book as a teaching tool because I imagined the text to be, while full of interesting and amusing facts and dates about the Tudors, too humorous and simplified to use in the classroom. However, the text did seem suitable for my Key Stage 2 pupils. In addition, the



book was enthusiastically received by my pupils immediately. As a result, I ended up using most of the chapters in the book to support my English and history teaching.

I planned my English lessons so that my pupils read extracts from *Terrible Tudors* over approximately four weeks' worth of English lessons. The children were eager to engage with the book. Despite it containing many jokes on each page, the pupils demonstrated that they could respond to the text sensibly and appropriately once they understood the purpose for reading it. Each lesson usually began by reading from a different chapter of the book, which acted as a starter activity for either a speaking or writing main activity. The book also contained various fun comprehension quizzes and games throughout.

How did *Terrible Tudors* support English and history?

Two examples of how I used the *Terrible Tudors* text to help me formulate English lesson plans while also developing historical understanding were:

Lesson idea 1 – one-sided argument 'Margaret is not guilty of witchcraft!'

From the chapter 'Terrible Tudor Witches', pupils looked at a comic strip which told the story of a Tudor woman accused by the court of being a witch. They used the woman's story to create a piece of writing, persuading the courts that she was innocent. My pupils built a case for the woman by retrieving information from the *Terrible Tudors* text that was relevant to their task. They organised their arguments and evidence at the planning stages of writing, and structured their final piece of writing using paragraphs and suitable sentence openers such as 'Also...Moreover... Therefore...etc.' Pupils showcased their arguments by acting them out in court scenes. This had the advantage that it demonstrated different historical interpretations and viewpoints and how it was possible to construct history in different ways.

Lesson idea 2 – Balanced Argument: 'Was Henry VIII a Good or Bad King?'

From the chapter 'Terrible Tudor Kings and Queens', pupils read facts on Henry VIII and determined whether they made him a 'good' or 'bad' king. They then looked at additional texts about Henry VIII so that they could cross-reference and supplement the information they had researched from *Terrible Tudors*. Pupils sorted their facts on Henry VIII into two categories before writing a two-sided argument of him. They chose appropriate adjectives with which to describe the king, based on their new-found knowledge of him. They looked at different examples of discursive writing in order to learn their distinctive features, such as having introductory and closing paragraphs and suitable openers like, 'On the other hand...However...Some people think...etc.' Besides the English objectives, this helped pupils understand how historical judgements are made including the use of evidence.

Other extended pieces of writing I was able to generate in my lessons using *Terrible Tudors* were:

Chapter title	Extended writing activity
Terrible Tudor food	Fictional recount 'The day of the banquet'
Terrible Tudor clothes	Information text 'Tudor fashion' Instructions 'How to make a ruff'
Terrible Shakespeare	Biography 'The life of Shakespeare'

What were the drawbacks of using *Terrible Tudors* for teaching English and history?

- Like all books used in the classroom, the text needed differentiating to suit all levels of ability; some of the historical language was difficult for lower-ability pupils to understand, the font was a little too small in places for weaker readers, and some of the jokes went over the heads of certain pupils.
- The funny illustrations and jokes in the book and video clips sometimes distracted easily-excited pupils, so focusing these pupils was occasionally required.
- Horrible Histories* video clips about the Tudors needed to be considered carefully before showing them to the class – the television show is much more comical than the book.
- The books can give a distorted view of history, persuading pupils that history was little more than a series of disasters and stupid behaviour. It was made clear to the pupils that it was not really a history book but more of a 'fact book with jokes'.

How did these lessons link to my history teaching?

Beneath the sometimes gory facts and subversive humour in the book, there were frequent serious points and fascinating historical facts in it. One of the aims of the history curriculum is to get pupils to create their own structured accounts of history, including written narratives and analyses. The book inspired my pupils to produce their own Tudor-themed extended pieces of writing from reading it.

Another history aim is to help pupils understand the methods of historical enquiry, including how evidence is used rigorously to make historical claims, and discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed. The book contained many references to historical sources when presenting facts about the Tudors, which meant the pupils learnt that facts are linked to historical evidence. It also gave my pupils the chance to question historical facts, such as reading the pages about whether Christopher Marlowe actually wrote the Shakespeare plays or not.

The Tudors are taught as part of the National Curriculum's 'local history' because of the proximity of the school to Hampton Court Palace. It has the advantage of being a historical site constructed after 1066 that is significant in its locality. In the future, I hope to get the chance to teach pupils about crime and punishment from Anglo-Saxon times to the present, as part of the 'beyond 1066' unit. The *Terrible Tudors* chapter on 'Tudor crimes and terrible punishments' would certainly be on my list of resources to look at when planning these lessons.

Conclusion

If nothing else, it was fantastic to see pupils engage with a non-fiction text on a level normally reserved for an exciting novel. Many could not wait to read the next chapter of the book from lesson to lesson. They really enjoyed watching the *Terrible Tudor* video clips from the BBC Bitesize website too (which also had related lesson ideas on it).

According to an interview in the *Guardian* in 2012, Deary reportedly said he was unhappy that *Horrible Histories* had become a classroom text in some schools. 'If they're part of the curriculum, kids will get turned off them' was his argument. In the same article, though, he stated that he had lost count of the number of parents who had told him their children 'had never read a book before, and now just can't put them down'. In my experience, with careful planning and the right teaching approach in the classroom, a *Horrible Histories* book can help boost pupil engagement and attainment levels in English and history.

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