Westminster Abbey
Learning

St Edward the Confessor and Westminster Abbey – teachers' notes

Thank you for downloading this resource. We hope that it will be a useful teaching tool in your classroom.

As we continue to grow our free catalogue of teaching resources, we'd really appreciate a few minutes of your time to let us know what you liked and what could be improved. Please complete this five-question survey.

Warning: Slide 9 shows a photograph of skeletons, as part of an archaeological dig.

SLIDE 2: Learning Objectives:

- To examine a range of contemporary sources about the 11th century Westminster Abbey
- To investigate interpretations of St Edward the Confessor's motivation for building Westminster Abbey

SLIDE 3: Use these images as a starter activity to inspire interest and hook students in.

- What is the object?
- Where is it situated?
- When was it made?
- Why was it made?

This might look like a boring old door. It is an old door but it happens to be the oldest door in England. Scientists say that the trees that made this door were chopped down in about 1050. The door can be found inside Westminster Abbey and it dates from the time of St Edward the Confessor. It is very thick and has heavy bolts on it- possibly something very precious was once stored behind it.

The lesson focuses on sources of evidence and what we can learn from them in relation to St Edward the Confessor's Westminster Abbey.

SLIDE 4: Ask pupils to share with the class what they know about Westminster Abbey. This is designed to be a quick 3-minute activity to gauge level of knowledge.

SLIDE 5: Use the following information to give pupils a 5-minute potted history of Westminster Abbey.

1. In 960AD, St Dunstan (then Bishop of London) brought twelve monks from Glastonbury Abbey and founded a new monastic community at Westminster, possibly on the site of an earlier church. King Edgar endowed the monastery and the link between Westminster Abbey and the royal family was established.

2. St Edward the Confessor rebuilt and enlarged the existing monastery between 1042-1065. The church was the first in England to be built in the Norman or Romanesque style. He was buried here in January 1066. Many stories were told of St Edward the Confessor's miraculous healing

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powers. These stories were written down and popularised by the monks of Westminster Abbey. In 1161 St Edward the Confessor was canonized (he was made a saint) and his tomb became a shrine. He is still buried inside the Abbey today.

3. Westminster Abbey is the Coronation Church. Coronations have taken place here since 1066. Harold was almost certainly crowned at the Abbey on 6th January 1066 (although no written evidence survives). William the Conqueror was crowned here on Christmas day 1066. Queen Elizabeth II was crowned here in 1953.

4. Over 3,000 people are buried or memorialized at Westminster Abbey. Thirty kings and queens are buried here. Other tombs and memorials include those of famous writers, politicians, musicians and scientists.

SLIDE 6: This is a modern artist's impression showing the Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey, as they may have looked in the 11th century at the time St Edward the Confessor lived. He was responsible for building both. It is important to note that St Edward the Confessor's involvement in the creation of these buildings and their neighbouring location demonstrates the start of a powerful connection between church and state.

SLIDE 7: Talk to pupils about the 'cult' of St Edward the Confessor

1. In the 13th century, King Henry III decided to rebuild Westminster Abbey and to create a more fitting shrine for St Edward the Confessor. Just two hundred years after St Edward the Confessor built his church, Henry III demolished it. Henry rebuilt Westminster Abbey in the new Gothic style. The 'new' Westminster Abbey was consecrated in 1269.

2. The body of St Edward the Confessor was preserved and placed inside a new golden shrine. Pilgrims travelled here to kneel in the niches of St Edward the Confessor's tomb, and to pray for healing.

3. This image comes from The Litlyngton Missal, a precious 14th century document from the Abbey collection. St Edward the Confessor is depicted as a gentle, pious, 'other worldly' king both in art and literature throughout the medieval period.

SLIDE 8: Ask pupils to talk in pairs about the different types of evidence that might be available to historians trying to find out about St Edward the Confessor's 11th century church. Remind pupils to consider physical, literary and visual evidence. Take suggestions from pupils before moving onto next slides.

SLIDE 9: First example: archaeological evidence. This photograph shows an archeological dig in 2010 which uncovered skeletons dating back to the Anglo-Saxon period.

SLIDE 10: Second example: written records. This writ (unlike many others) is genuine and dates from St Edward the Confessor's reign.

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SLIDE 11: Third example: surviving objects. This door, which we discussed at the start of the lesson, is believed to be the oldest in England and is one of the few objects remaining from St Edward the Confessor's church.

SLIDE 12: Fourth example: contemporary image. This image shows that Westminster Abbey can be seen on the Bayeux Tapestry, c 1070.

SLIDE 13: Fifth example: artists' reconstructions based on surviving evidence. This is a modern reconstruction of St Edward the Confessor's church.

SLIDE 14: 'To write the history of Edward and his reign we have to scrape the barrel with care: every scrap of information is precious'? Discuss what does historian Frank Barlow mean by this?

Edward the Confessor
Frank Barlow
University of California Press 1970
p. xxvii

Full quotation for context: 'To write the history of Edward and his reign we have to scrape the barrel with care: every scrap of information is precious. We have also to use the most exact techniques and rely much on our understanding of contemporary society in other countries. Any historical reconstruction must be a personal creation, and the scarcer and more untrustworthy the evidence, the greater the artifice. The facts simply do not speak for themselves. Nor can the facts and the historian's contribution be separated. A history is not made of bricks and mortar. The historian does his best and writes in good faith. He meets uncertainty at every point and offers his solution. Sometimes the only course that he can honestly follow is to offer several equally plausible possibilities, between which he cannot decide. He has to steer between bland assurance, which he has no warrant, and complete scepticism, which denies his craft. Above all, he has to withstand the temptation to squeeze his sources too hard. A few clear drops of information are better than a larger but more turbid yield.'

SLIDE 15: Hand out "Scraps-of-information-activity" worksheet. Ask pupils to examine four sources of evidence and accompanying text. Pupils should fill in the activity sheet, using sources to help them answer the question: What was St Edward the Confessor's motivation for building Westminster Abbey?

SLIDE 16: Discuss answers to the question for "Scrap of Evidence 1".

St Edward the Confessor was enriching Westminster Abbey through the granting of lands to the monastery. Financial gifts to the church could be evidence of his desire to improve his chances of salvation through doing good works. During his reign, St Edward the Confessor endowed Westminster Abbey with twice the amount of land it already owned.

SLIDE 17: Discuss answers to the question for "Scrap of Evidence 2".

In choosing to build the largest, grandest building at the time in the Norman style, he was making a propaganda statement. He had been well looked after in Normandy during his exile and he was inspired

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by Norman church building. Perhaps the building of Westminster Abbey could be seen as a political statement rather than a religious one.

SLIDE 18: Discuss answers to the question for “Scrap of Evidence 3”.

He spent lavishly on the building of Westminster Abbey because he conceived it as his burial place. He also built the Palace of Westminster next door so that he had regular access and involvement in the project.

SLIDE 19: Discuss answers to the question for “Scrap of Evidence 4”.

He was motivated by his personal faith and devotion to St Peter to build Westminster Abbey in the place of the old St Peter’s Church.

SLIDE 20: Discuss the three quotations from historians.

Historian Emma Mason puts forward the argument that the building of Westminster Abbey was a political move. St Edward the Confessor wanted a visual reminder of God’s power behind him.

Nicole Marafioti acknowledges the political intent but places greater emphasis on the spiritual motivation for St Edward the Confessor’s building project.

Sara N James suggests St Edward the Confessor’s motivation for building Westminster Abbey in the location, on the scale and in the style that he chose was to distance himself from his Anglo-Saxon predecessors and to draw nearer to the continent.

Pupils could be encouraged to assess the similarities and differences in these three interpretations and to discuss the complexities for historians of identifying a person’s motivation for past actions.

Westminster Abbey and Its People, C.1050-c.1216
Studies in the History of Medieval Religion, Issue 9
Emma Mason
Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1996
p.16

The King's Body: Burial and Succession in Late Anglo-Saxon England
Nicole Marafioti
University of Toronto Press, 2014
p.40-41

Art in England: The Saxons to the Tudors: 600-1600
By Sara N. James
Oxbow Books, 2016
p.41

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SLIDE 21: Set the following essay question: “St Edward the Confessor was primarily motivated by his faith to build Westminster Abbey”. To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Dependent on time, a plan could be created during the lesson. The essay can be completed as a homework task.

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