Changing attitudes towards Medieval Graffiti: Group leader notes

The worksheet is designed as a starting point for classroom discussions concerning the history of graffiti, changing attitudes to graffiti, and the wider moral issues of creating graffiti. The worksheet contains areas of factual information that lead to wider questions. There are no obviously right or wrong answers, and it is hoped that the resulting discussions and debate will lead to students critically examining their own views towards graffiti - both in the past and present.

1. Why do you think attitudes to graffiti began to change in the middle of the nineteenth century?

Topics that might influence the debate:

The change of attitudes towards how historic buildings were thought of. Prior to the nineteenth century a historic site might be valued as being 'picturesque', but many sites were simply swept away as 'improvements' were made. The nineteenth century sees the beginning of heritage tourism, with castles and historic sites beginning to become valued for what they could tell us about the past. This movement eventually resulted in the establishment of organisations such as The National Trust.

Further research: Lord Curzon and the beginning of the conservation movement. The origins of The National Trust.

2. Do you think graffiti is a good thing or a bad thing?

Topics that might influence the debate:

This is a current debate that is still evolving. What is the difference between someone spray painting a 'tag' on a bus shelter, the street art of people such as Banksy, and someone scratching their name into an ancient monument like Stonehenge? Is there any difference? Are they all vandalism, or are they all art? Discussion should try and focus upon perceptions of right and wrong, and the 'context' in which the graffiti is created. Does the content of graffiti change our perceptions as to its value?

Further research: examine the rise of 'street art' in New York during the 1970s.

3. So how does that change how we think about attitudes to medieval graffiti?

Topics that might influence the debate:

The medieval graffiti was scratched through bright pigment - making it very visible (see reconstruction). Therefore, if the church authorities (vicar, churchwardens, etc) had regarded the graffiti as antisocial, or vandalism, they could easily have scrapped it from the walls or panted over it. The evidence is that they didn't - which suggests that they regarded it as acceptable in some form or another.

Further questions: What made this medieval graffiti acceptable? Was it because they were mainly prayers or spiritual in nature? Was it because they knew the people who had made the marks? Had they perhaps made some of the marks themselves?

Further research: ONLINE - look up and examine the graffiti inscriptions at Ashwell church in Hertfordshire.