

Tom Highflyer

Primary Education Resources

Teachers notes



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AIMS

The mysterious story of Tom Highflyer enables students to uncover local history from the experience of a young Black boy who was brought from East Africa to Brighton and attended a local school. These educational resources also allow students to explore the historical process and how historians create a narrative using incomplete evidence and employing tentative language to make their claims.

The educational resources on the website are designed to be used flexibly over three or more lessons. They include:

- 2 plug and play ready-made presentations (lessons 1 and 3) and a pack of differentiated printable source sheets (lesson 2)
- 4 short video clips in which a young black man, Bobby, travels to different locations in Brighton to explore the story of Tom Highflyer, how it was unearthed and his own sense of identity.
- A plug and play ready-made lesson “**How should we remember this boy who mysteriously died in Brighton?**” aimed at secondary pupils, which supports students to consider historical interpretations.
- There are additional resources on the website which can be used for further detailed research.

There is more detail below about how to use the resources.

THE MYSTERY OF THE GRAVE IN WOODVALE CEMETARY

Tom Highflyer’s grave was discovered by a council worker with an intriguing message on the headstone. It gives the details of a boy who was rescued from a slave dhow and died in Brighton aged about 12. He was given quite an expensive and elaborate gravestone that would have been more usual for a person of a higher status. That he was given such a dignified burial and to be remembered in such a way tells something about the esteem that Tom was obviously held in by those who were caring for him. Someone had clearly loved Tom Highflyer.

Brighton and Hove’s Black History volunteers set about exploring resources at the Keep in Brighton, at Portsmouth, online and at Kew to uncover his fascinating story.



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The resources in this pack give students the opportunity to interrogate the original sources.

WHO WAS TOM MALCOLM SABINE HIGHFLYER?

There are many unanswered questions about how a young African boy rescued from a slave ship came to be buried in a graveyard in Brighton in 1870.

Tom Highflyer along with two other boys were rescued from a slave dhow in 1866 by Captain Thomas Malcolm Sabine Pasley of the Royal Navy's East African Anti-Slave Trade Squadron. Tom was about 8 or 9 years old when rescued and was named for the ship and its captain.

The other boys that sailed to England with Tom were also given names connecting them to their rescuers. Sam Oldfield was possibly named after a naval officer aboard the HMS Highflyer, and Bob Dhow, receiving his name from the type of ship from which they were rescued from. Around 152 people were rescued from the slave dhow and it seems Tom and two other boys were taken to be servants to the officers and taught how to be valets. This could be an interesting discussion point.

We do not yet know what became of Sam and Bob and very little is known about what happened to Tom after he arrived in England in 1868 after spending two years at sea. It is possible that he was unwell and sent to Brighton because of his health – it was popular as a spa at the time. There is some indication that his 'master's family' went abroad and wanted to ensure he received an education as well as learning domestic service. This gives an interesting perspective on approaches to education at the time, employment for children and attitudes to Tom as an East African.

Tom is not mentioned on the Brighton census because of his early demise but his death certificate indicates that he lived with Henry and Eliza Thompson in a lodging house in Great College Street. According to one source the "lady under whose



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special care Tom was placed” while at Brighton was “very anxious that Tommy should not only live in a Christian country, but should also be a Christian boy.” After regularly attending Sunday school, he apparently asked to be baptised and his baptism was attended by his “master’s sister and mother”.

Shortly after his baptism in March Tom became weak and could not eat, according to one source because the English climate did not agree with him, and despite being nursed and watched over by his master’s sister he died on June 20th 1870. His death certificate gives his cause of death as tubercular liver and dropsy (a swelling of soft tissue) - manifestations of TB which was a common cause of death at the time. Robert Koch did not prove that the disease was caused by an infectious agent until 1882.

The remaining mystery is that whoever paid for Tom’s headstone deliberately left the record of their contribution blank. Why they did not want to reveal their identity remains a subject for conjecture.

Using the presentation

The presentation is designed to create a sense of mystery and intrigue about Tom’s life and encourage students to ask their own questions about Tom which they can attempt to answer using the evidence. Teachers can also pose their own questions for students to research. Pupils are also encouraged to think about different types of evidence to use for research.

1. The early slides encourage pupils to explore language which can express different degrees of certainty.
2. The creation of a **certainty line** enables pupils to make judgements about the security of the claims they have made about Tom’s life using the evidence. The certainty line can be drawn individually or created at the front of the class for pupils to come to the front of the class and place their statements on post-it notes along the spectrum depending on how sure they are about their claims.



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3. Discussions about where to position claims could encourage pupils to refer to source provenance or other corroborating evidence.
4. Pupils can move their claims up and down the certainty line as they uncover more evidence to corroborate or refute the information.
5. Pupils are encouraged to consider the types of evidence which might answer their own questions. Contextual evidence about how researchers found the sources can be gained from 4 video clips.
6. A timeline of Tom's life can be shared to underpin the chronology of the events once the evidence has been explored. There is scope here for a discussion about how historians should 'fill in the gaps' in evidence when they write historical accounts and why some people leave little evidence behind.
7. The final task, in which students create an information board for visitors combines their research of his life and the use of different degrees of tentative language, as well an exploration of how to present the information in an attractive way for visitors.

Using the evidence pack

The evidence source pack is called Primary Lesson 2 and can be printed off and/or used in presentation format, guided by the teacher, to take pupils through the process of source interrogation.

1. The source sheets have prompts to help students to infer evidence about Tom's life. They do not specifically direct students to examine the provenance or utility but they encourage them to use tentative language about the claims they make from the evidence. Teachers can encourage students to explain their choice of tentative language based on their assessment of the comparative strength of the evidence.
2. Some of the evidence contains factual detail such as Tom's age and name, and when he was rescued, from official sources, which initially seem irrefutable. Further investigation reveals contradictions between sources about this data, and also the realisation that Tom was named after the captain and



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the rescue ship and we don't know his real name. Pupils should be encouraged to move their claims along the certainty line when this happens. This helps students to understand the process of writing history.

3. Source sheets marked as 'extension' involve an examination of tone or trying to draw broad conclusions from evidence about life in Brighton when Tom arrived. There are also opportunities to make inferences about how Tom felt which will necessarily be very tentative.
4. The sources only partially illustrate the story of Tom's life. The questions which remain can form the springboard for a discussion about omissions in history and dominant perspectives.

Further Activities

1. Reference to Tom 'belonging to his master' in the sources invite comparisons to child labour in the Victorian period or an exploration of the nature of slavery and liberty
2. Using information on the website pupils can find out more about East African slavery, life on board a ship, tracing Tom's journey after his capture using an internet map, Education and schooling in 1870s.
3. Comparisons can be made to the life of Tom and Sarah Forbes Bonnetta who was his contemporary in Brighton.
4. Pupils can write imaginative pieces exploring what his school friends would have found out if they had asked Tom to explain his life. This can also lead to discussions about diversity and inclusive behaviour towards children arriving new in school.
5. Discussions about why a bus has been named after Tom and why Brighton should remember him.



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