

# Tom Highflyer

## Secondary Education

### Resources

#### Teachers notes



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## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

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The mysterious story of Tom Highflyer enables students to explore local history from the experience of a young Black boy who was brought from East Africa to Brighton and attended a local school. There are many possibilities for teaching.

- Interrogating sources in order to answer an **historical enquiry question**.
- Exploring the concept of **interpretations** in its technical curricular sense as ‘how people in later times have reconstructed and presented the past’(Counsell 2013).
- Examining the **utility** of sources to answer different questions.
- Discussing the perspectives of Black History and identity within **diversity**.
- Demonstrating the process of local research using a range of resources.
- Linking Tom’s story to other individuals in Brighton and Hove in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century such as Sarah Forbes Bonetta (**similarity and difference**).
- Considering Tom’s **significance** and relation to Brighton and Hove as a Sanctuary City.
- Exploring historical **empathy**.

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

- 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?**” which supports students to interrogate evidence in order to construct their own interpretation of Tom’s life or to consider his significance. They also evaluate an artist’s interpretation of his life.
- A pack of 11 separate primary sources with guidance for students about how to analyse the evidence.
- There is additionally a plug and play ready-made lesson designed for years 5 and 6 which enables students to explore the tentative nature of claims made in historical accounts and how to compare and contrast evidence.

There is more detail below about how to use the resources for a range of different purposes



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## THE MYSTERY OF THE GRAVE IN WOODVALE CEMETARY

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

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## WHO WAS TOM MALCOLM SABINE HIGHFLYER?

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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.



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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 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.



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## 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.

1. Contextual evidence and the process of research can be gained from 4 video clips
2. A separate pack of primary sources can be printed separately to piece together Tom's story.
3. Tom has been represented by a local artist in a life-size portrait and this can be used to explore the idea of interpretations (to prepare for the process of comparing written interpretations). Teachers may like to create a table to structure the students' evaluation:
  - a) What does the portrait show explicitly and implicitly (facial expression, body language, clothes, size)?
  - b) What was the purpose and intended audience?
  - c) What is the relationship between the interpretation and the evidence - what sources might Josef Cabey have used?
  - d) Which parts are factual and which are imagined?
  - e) How has the interpretation been affected by the context in which it was created?
4. The final task, in which students create a piece of work to remember Tom can be used as the basis of a discussion about significance and why Brighton and Hove might want to remember him. It also enables students to select and deploy the evidence to create their own interpretation of his life in a creative way.



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## Using the evidence pack

The evidence pack (also called Primary Lesson 2) is designed to be used both for the primary and secondary lessons.

1. Secondary teachers can print the sources and direct different groups to make inferences from the evidence before pooling their knowledge with other groups. The source sheets have differing levels of difficulty and can be differentiated or staggered in their release. (Students could also work through all the source sheets one at a time, building their own picture of Tom's life as they compare the evidence.)
2. Teachers may like to create a table to structure students' evidence work.
3. 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 language based on their assessment of the comparative strength of the evidence.
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 using the source evidence

1. The tentative nature of historical claims: some of the evidence contains factual detail which initially seems irrefutable, such as when he was rescued, his age at death and his name on the death certificate. Further investigation reveals contradictions between sources and also the realisation that Tom was named after the captain of his ship and we don't know his real name.
2. Tone and language in the context of the time: inferences can be made from some of the sources about how Tom was treated on the ship (cared for or kept as a status symbol) and in Brighton. The patronising tone of some sources is revealing about how Tom was perceived:

*'I remember patting his woolly head, and asking him how he liked it; upon which his answer, "Me like it bery good," made us all smile'*  
(Church Missionary Juvenile Instructor, volume 6, issue 6, 1870)



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3. Links to Victorian child labour or the impact of abolition: some students might consider that Tom is still treated like a slave but others might compare his experience to previous studies of child labour. Students could prepare opposing arguments about the extent of Tom's freedom after his rescue.

*'He was devoted to his young master, and was very proud of belonging to him'*

*(Church Missionary Juvenile Instructor, volume 6, issue 6, 1870)*

4. Using further research from Brighton Museums (<https://brightonmuseums.org.uk/discover/2015/06/12/views-of-19th-century-brighton-hove-an-historical-background> ) or My Brighton and Hove ([http://www.mybrightonandhove.org.uk/page\\_id\\_9066.aspx](http://www.mybrightonandhove.org.uk/page_id_9066.aspx)) or the Black History site ( <http://www.black-history.org.uk/category/19th-century/>) to hypothesise about what Tom's experience of Brighton was like in the 1870s.
5. A creative exploration into historical empathy and how Tom might have felt - Tom's age, ethnicity and experience as a newcomer to the town may chime with students from a minority ethnic heritage.
6. Utility and historical questions: students can consider "how useful is this evidence for..."
  - a) The impact of the abolition of slavery
  - b) The experience of children in the 1860s
  - c) Attitudes to race following the abolition of slavery
7. Further research about life on board ship, slavery in East Africa can be made using the website materials and links.



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