

# Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

## Famous people and me! teacher's notes

This unit looks at the role of the individual (unit 22 in key stage 3 schemes of work), comparing the notion of fame in history and now, and introduces students to the ways in which the Oxford DNB can be used for research. It also addresses the ICT requirement in history.

*Also: to show the range of reasons why we remember some historical figures and not others; and to compare the significance of a modern famous person and a well-known historical figure.*

What makes a person famous?

[in their own time . . . centuries later . . . you could use this as a discussion session]

Write a list of the four most important reasons that make a person famous.

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[You will need to explain to them how to log onto the website.]

This task will help you to make good use of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and find some of the many ways you can learn about people in the past.

Log on to the Oxford DNB. Click on the blue link: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/subscribed>. If you have access by username and password, you will be prompted to type them.

Find people from the Oxford DNB who:

- Share your surname [*Put your surname in the box at the top right of the screen. Click Go. Select a person from your list of hits. If you get no hit for your name choose another.*]
  - What is his/her full name?
  - What was his/her occupation or job or activity?
- Share your birthday [*In people search choose birth as event and type in day/month but NOT year.*]
  - What is his/her full name?
  - In what year was he/she born?
  - Where was he/she born?
- Died in the year you were born and have a picture [*Clear your last search! Choose death as event and type in the correct year.*]
  - What is his/her full name?
  - For what is he/she well known?
  - Is the picture a photograph, a painting, or some other image?

- Come from the same area as you *[Clear last search! Choose birth or residence as event and type your town or county in place.]*
    - What is his/her full name?
    - What is his/her connection with your area?
    - Did he/she live anywhere else?
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## Tips

- You can arrange a list of people in alphabetical, birth date, or death date order (see left-hand pane of results lists page). This may help you spot the people who look most interesting to you.
- If your first search gets no hit try something different.
- You can spot articles on the list with pictures because they have a little icon of a portrait.
- Once you've finished, try using the other search options—and your imagination.
- Remember: the Oxford DNB includes people born outside Britain who became famous here and British people famous abroad.

You could demonstrate how to do each of these activities on a whiteboard so the students understand what is required.

When you have completed the task you could ask students to discuss what they have learned from the Oxford DNB. For example that there are many different routes to becoming well known—some positive, some negative. People particularly famous for one activity sometimes turn out to have been involved in others, some surprising. People in the past sometimes travelled more widely than popularly thought now.

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## Extension

### Class discussion

- 1 From your searches: what sorts of people are remembered in the past? Why are some historical people famous and known to us?
- 2 What are the similarities and differences between being famous today and being famous in the past?
- 3 Your searches will have shown that not all details are known about a person in the past (for example we don't always know when they were born or where they lived): why do we not know everything about historical people, even if they are famous?
- 4 The Oxford DNB includes some of the men and women historians know about. But there are far more people in the past we have forgotten about. Why do some historical people become famous and some not?

You could also discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using the Oxford DNB rather than a search engine like Google or Altavista. [Oxford DNB articles have named authors. Sources listed at the end of the article make it clear where information comes from. Links to other websites like the Royal Historical Society bibliography and the National Portrait Gallery demonstrate the involvement of other experts.]

### TIPS

- The Oxford DNB is inclusive, with articles on people born in Britain and its colonies (while they were colonies) who made their names abroad, and on people born anywhere in the world who made their names in Britain and its colonies. Thus searching for non-Anglo-Saxon names and places can be encouraged.
- Articles vary significantly in length. Unsurprisingly, the longest tend to be on very well-known people like Winston Churchill, Elizabeth I, and William Shakespeare. It is probably worth encouraging the students towards less famous names: although fewer of these are illustrated, there are still plenty of examples with images.
- You can also try searching for names, places, and dates (always rendered day month year) in running text [see under 'Quick Search now' on Subscriber page or 'Full text' under Advanced search options]. Alternatively try looking for phrases like 'won a medal', 'football team', or 'well known for'. (You are advised to test these out in advance!)