

## Professor Katherine Wilson and Dr Thomas Pickles

**Professor Katherine Wilson** and **Dr Thomas Pickles** are historians from the **University of Chester** in the UK. Together, they have developed the **Mobility of Objects** project, which focuses on medieval history. The project aims to reinvigorate history education by empowering teachers and students to work with historical objects in the classroom.

In this conversation, Katherine and Thomas talk about their experience of developing this project. They share stories about how students engage with the medieval objects and give advice for teachers who are interested in engaging with these materials and implementing this teaching strategy in their classrooms.

## Break the podcast down:

**00.57: Hello Katherine and Thomas, welcome to the Futurum Careers podcast. How are you both this morning?**

**Katherine:** Very well, thank you, really looking forward to chatting today.

**Thomas:** Hi Joe, thanks very much for having us here. I'm great, thank you.

**Well, I thought it would be best if we start with one of you maybe just setting the scene a little bit and giving us a brief overview of your Mobility of Objects project.**

**Katherine:** So, the Mobility of Objects project, it's MOB for short and it covers the period from about the year 1000 through to 1700. What we're trying to do with this project is think about the ways in which objects circulated, were produced, were transformed, because during that period, 1000 to 1700, there's big transformations in the use of objects. There's lots more objects than ever before. There's lots more objects in people's homes.

So, the project seeks to uncover the reasons for these transformations. And at the heart of the project is the objects themselves and, particularly, everyday objects. We're not so interested in luxury objects that elites might have used. We're really interested in objects that the ordinary person might have got their hands on or used or had in their house. The objects are at the heart of it, and we also thought a lot about handling the objects to try and get to the 'why' of these transformations.

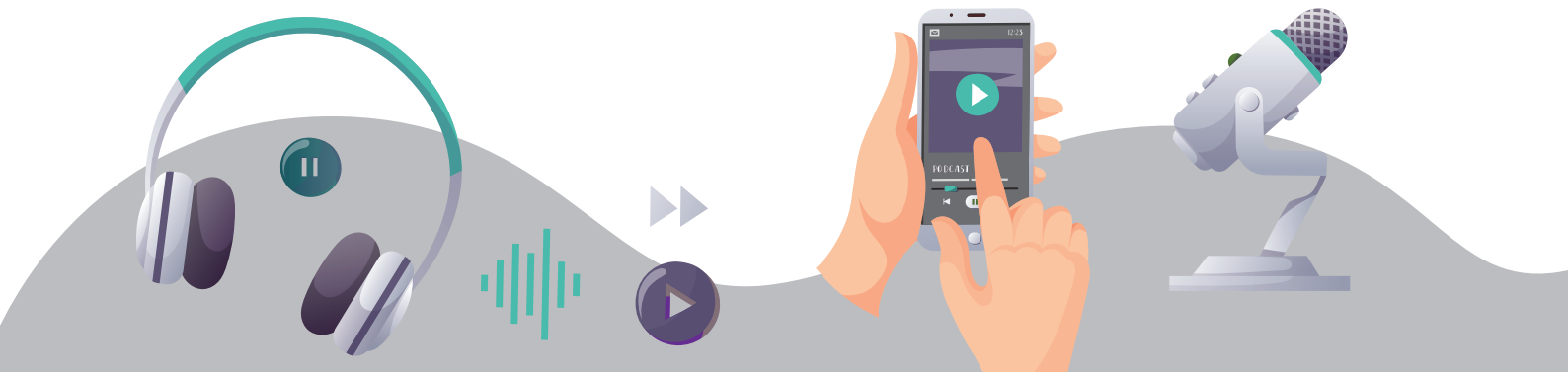
So, in the first phase of the project, we worked with our excellent colleagues at the Department of Education at the University of Chester. They encouraged us to take these objects, the objects from the Grosvenor Museum in Chester, these medieval objects – they encouraged us to take them out to schools. They also said, well, why don't we use our own PGCE teacher trainee students to go out into schools with the objects and let the pupils handle them.

**03.02 Thomas:** So, it's been a really interesting process. The suggestion was that it would be the end of primary school and the beginning of secondary school that would be a really good point in the curriculum to target. And the teachers and the trainee teachers who were involved said it'd be fantastic if you could bring the objects in and allow the students to handle them and ask the questions for themselves, without adding too much further context, so that they can make inferences from the objects out to some of the bigger ideas that they've been exploring within the curriculum.

So, what we do is to put the objects in front of them, and they look through them and ask very simple questions like: What does it look like this is made from? What type of object do you think it is? What sort of person might have made it? What different processes might have gone into putting it together? Who might have owned an object like this? Where might they have taken it? Why might they have wanted it? What might have happened to that object? One of the best bits of it at the end of that process is that Katherine asks the students to write a story, and they can imagine themselves to be the object itself if they want to and tell the biography of that object, or they can imagine themselves to be somebody who produced it or somebody who owned it or, indeed, somebody who discovered it. They can think about what might have happened to that object, what people invested in that object and what it meant to them, and what the object itself might have done.

**04.33: What kind of responses did you get from students? Are there any particular bits of feedback or any particular interactions or reactions that stand out to you?**

**Katherine:** The students were encouraged to write, often on paper plates to break away from the traditional kind of paper and present a more creative space for their reflections. Quite often, we'd get whole poems or stories that were written in a circular manner on the plate that kind of symbolised the



object's journey. Some of these reflections that the pupils did, where they were able to eke out a whole life of the object but also bring to life at the same time the bigger, historical context, were really fantastic.

**Thomas:** Yeah, I was really impressed by the way in which the pupils imagined people from different parts of medieval society. They didn't go immediately for elites. Very often they were thinking of themselves as being peasants or as being members of merchant families or crafter people in towns who were making things.

I think the most spectacular thing in the room when you're working with them is that they often use really big leaps of imagination. They'll take a key, and they'll imagine that it's the key to a toilet, and they'll imagine that it's the key to a toilet that someone died in. And then, of course, they'll think that that's a completely wacky idea until Katherine checks and discovers that there is, indeed, a case of someone dying on a medieval toilet. And that brings it full circle to them that they've learnt something new, and so have we really, about the period.

**06.10:** I think it's so interesting that the idea is to use everyday objects rather than elite objects. Why do you think those objects and handling the objects, compared to a traditional way of teaching history in a classroom, and even just the simple stuff of using a paper plate instead of a notebook [is valuable]? Why do you think that kind of teaching [works], what kind of effect does that have on students, and why do you think that has that effect?

**Katherine:** I think it gives them an immediacy with the past that they've maybe not encountered before in history teaching sometimes. Having something there that is 600-700 years old, that's in front of you, and handling that object and feeling the weight of it, looking at the marks that people might have left in it. For example, some of the shoes still had the imprint of people's toes in it. This brings to life these people in the past much more clearly.

When you're reading written sources, they're fantastic, of course, and they should be interrogated and used, but sometimes the people of the past in them can seem a little remote. When you've got an object where you might have a thumbprint or you can see very clearly that someone's handled it over their foot, it really brings to life that connection with the past. I think that, for me, is something there.

**Thomas:** Yeah, I'd agree with that. There's a really nice aspect to the object boxes that Liz Montgomery, who's the senior curator at the museum, has put together. A lot of the objects in the collection, we might know where they were found, so they'll have the acquisitions register, but we don't know very much about them or we have very little context to them, and we are very honest about that with the students in schools. And they like that because I think it frees them up. Nobody's got the right answer here, nobody can tell

them who it was who owned it. And so, they're free to, within bounds, to think about how that might have worked.

Some of the objects too are really interesting and mysterious. So, the keys, they always alight on because they're always really interested in the different sizes of the keys, what locks they might have opened, what the locks were attached to, what it was people were locking up in those places, and it's that mystery element too, I think.

**08.24:** It's the mystery, and if I find a key on the street, even just you know a normal house key, I'm thinking what or whose is this, what does this unlock? Maybe I'm going to find some treasure or something. So, I think that's a really good illustration of when those objects can really spark that imagination. You mentioned the object boxes, could you tell me a little bit more about that?

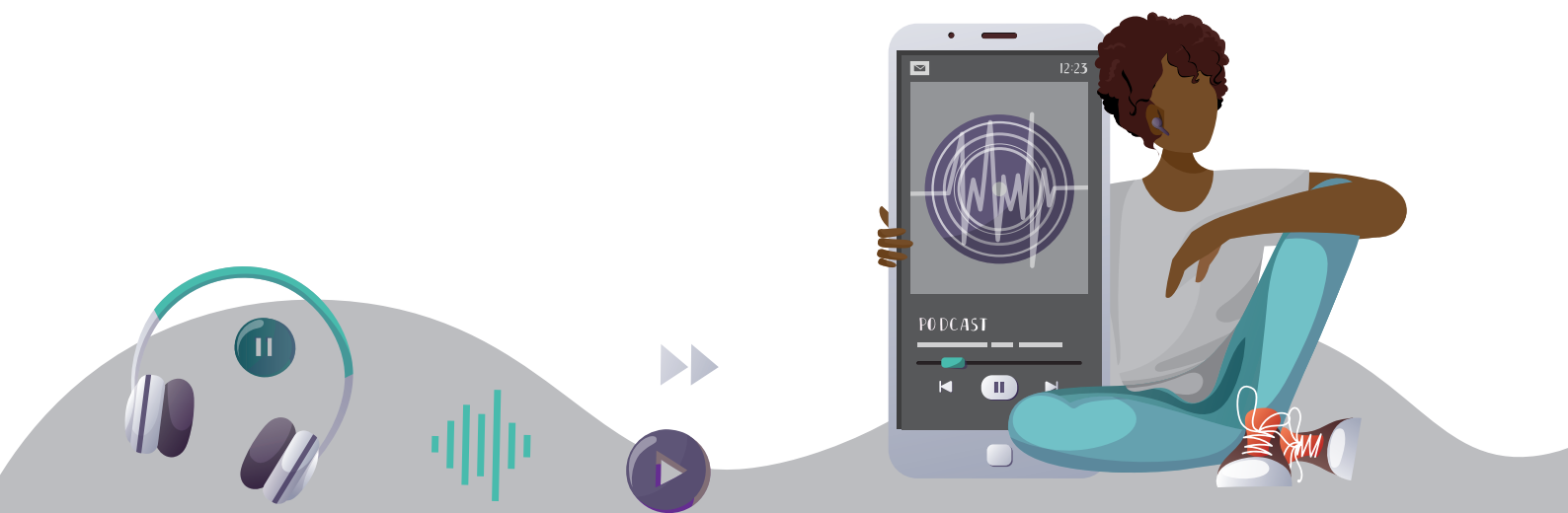
**Katherine:** So, part of the arts and humanities research project that we did with the follow-on funding money was to create object boxes that can be loaned to schools. These are held in the Grosvenor Museum, and you can get in touch with them, and they can loan them out to your school. They have some of these medieval objects, a piece of a shoe, a pilgrim badge. They have replicas as well, and they also have some sheet activity packs to help you plan your lesson and prompt your lesson. We're always keen for more schools to get in touch with the Grosvenor and say hey, you know we'd love to get one of these object boxes and do a session in our classroom.

**Thomas:** Yeah, part of the original project and the follow-on funding project was getting teachers together and saying to them, if you were working with these objects in the classroom, what would be the off-the-peg resources that you would like so that you can deploy them immediately, without further help. They actually designed the worksheets and the activities, and they're sitting in the boxes so that you've got everything you would need to just open those boxes up on tables, put out the worksheets and get working with the objects.

**10.03:** Amazing. We've talked about the impact that this has on students but what have you noticed through the project about how teachers respond to these boxes and this kind of teaching?

**Katherine:** Teachers seemed to really like this inquiry style learning and the fact that you don't need to know anything about the objects. I always stress that – that's the whole point of this project in a way.

**Thomas:** Yeah, and I think during the workshops that we've been involved in, the teachers have observed repeatedly that pupils who have a range of different educational approaches really respond very well to this kind of activity, because there's a lot of different ways in which they can engage with the objects and a lot of different outputs they can produce. What we've seen is that some of the students who have staff who are supporting them one-on-one in the sessions will suddenly become very focused and engaged. We've



certainly had lots of encounters with pupils who initially felt like this wasn't for them. They were sitting quietly, not really wanting to engage, but because you can get them in a conversation about how that compares to things they might be familiar with in the present and things perhaps in their home life, their family life, then suddenly they feel they can reach back and talk about these things because they're not being expected to know something about the past, and they're not being expected to produce that knowledge.

**11.26: Do you have any advice for teachers who might go out and get one of these object boxes? It's quite a different way of teaching to what they might be used to and like you said, some people might not engage with it straight away. What's some advice that you could give the teachers to help them through that process?**

**Katherine:** I think the first thing is, don't be wary or frightened of the box or the boxes and don't be daunted by the fact that there are no right answers, because that's the fun that you can have with this project. What I would say is, have a browse around the website, which has all the lesson plans and things like that on it, so that you can see that you've got a clearly structured session that you can feel secure in. I know as an ex-teacher myself that I love a good lesson plan – that always gives me confidence before going into a session with something new.

And do get in touch with ourselves as well. We'll be happy to share experiences. I think sometimes there's fears that people will maybe break the objects or throw them around and, like I say, in those 2,000 pupils or so, there's not been a breakage. There's not been any throwing around. There's been just genuine engagement from the pupils at both primary and secondary level.

**Thomas:** Yeah, I think I'd echo that. I think also taking seriously whatever they say, even if they're not intending it to be serious, and going with that and treating it as if it's a really interesting proposition often works very well, particularly with people who think they're having a joke about the material. I find that very enjoyable.

I think also not worrying that this is a project which is about history or archaeology. Certainly, with the end of primary/beginning of secondary students, I've often ended up in conversations which are not at all about history but about how do you know what type of material this is made out of. Actually, what would be involved in casting iron, and I don't always know the answer to these. How do you get from a cow to a leather shoe? Those kind of questions. And so, they can take you into different parts of the curriculum.

**13.37: Yeah, great. It sounds like there's jumping off points there to go into all sorts of different topics. So, now I want to ask you about your experiences of going through this project, how did it feel to do this thing and see these reactions from the students and from the teachers?**

**Katherine:** That's a really nice question. It takes me back to the very first time I think we'd taken the objects out into schools, and I genuinely didn't know how this was going to work. We'd done our academic workshops, and we'd done all the writing from that, and then we were entering this new phase of taking these objects out into schools, and we hadn't done this before.

So, I was quite apprehensive. And I remember, I think we did about four days in schools around the northwest and on the last day, it was having seen four days of sheer joy, of watching the pupils engage with the objects and discussing and critically thinking about them, and I remember feeling very happy.

It had been and it continues to be such a wonderful experience to take the museum to the pupils in their classroom and then hear their very important thoughts about the objects, because they've informed our own project, and we've produced publications from the pupils work.

**Thomas:** I can only echo that. We did exactly the same handling workshops with academics as part of the research arm of the project. And it's been brilliant watching the pupils, I think, deal with them much better than we did. We had an extraordinary experience of being faced with things like shoes and genuinely having conversations about what were medieval floors like, what were people walking on? We suddenly realised, a lot of us who were experts in different things, that we'd never really thought about it. There were a lot of those kinds of conversations. What you discover is, the students are much less boxed in by prior knowledge. They're much freer to think and to make analogies with the present or with other periods or places they've been. You get a wealth of different answers out of them which is very, very exciting for us, I think. We learn a lot.

**Amazing. It sounds like it's such an exciting, engaging project. I wish I could have a go at it, it sounds like a lot of fun. Could you just say one more time how teachers can get hold of these boxes and how they can implement this in their classroom?**

**Katherine:** We have a website which they can look up...

**Thomas:** That is [mob.chester.ac.uk](http://mob.chester.ac.uk).

**Katherine:** You can use the website for having a look at the resources and then if you want to order one, either email the Grosvenor Museum – you can look them up on the website and request one – and if you want to make doubly sure, then get in touch with myself and Tom through the University of Chester website, and we can direct or get in contact with the senior curator of the museum to get your box and get you started.

Download Katherine and Thomas's podcast PowerPoint, CPD brochure and PowerPoint, and animation at [futurumcareers.com/engaging-history-the-educational-impact-of-medieval-objects](http://futurumcareers.com/engaging-history-the-educational-impact-of-medieval-objects)

