



HOUSE OF LORDS

Library Note

Debate on 20 October: Teaching of History in Schools

This Library Note provides background reading for the debate to be held on Thursday 20 October:

“To call attention to the teaching of history in schools”

It summarises theoretical arguments about the reasons for studying history, whether history as a discipline and a subject in schools is in decline, before describing the way history is currently taught in the school curriculum and how this might develop in future.

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1. History in Crisis?

In recent years, history as a discipline has come under attack. In part this has come from a number of postmodernist writers who have sought to argue that history is merely a form of narrative whose objectivity must be questioned. Historical sources are seen by such writers as texts—discourses, systems of signification by which we understand the past and whereby history is presented as a human construct. Alun Munslow, for instance, has questioned the traditional view that there is an objective truth of the past which historians have to simply recover or uncover and present to the world:

The past is not discovered or found. It is created and represented by the historian as a text, which in turn is consumed by the reader... The idea of the truth being rediscovered in the evidence is a nineteenth-century modernist conception and it has no place in contemporary writing about the past.¹

Writers have also argued that histories are subject to the prejudices of the historians who write them and are rooted in the power structures of society. Hence, Munslow claims that histories have been previously shaped by a “hierarchy of master narratives like liberalism, science, Marxism, socialism, or a view of history that emphasized either the discovery of the past as it actually was, or even the inevitability of progress”.² Similarly, Keith Jenkins has maintained that historians:

... go about their work in mutually recognizable ways that are epistemologically, methodologically, ideologically and practically positioned and whose products, once in circulation, are subject to a series of uses and abuses that are logically infinite but which in actuality generally correspond to a range of power bases that exist at any given moment and which structure and distribute the meanings of histories along a dominant-marginal structure.³

Whilst Munslow and Jenkins argued that this should liberate historians, some were unnerved. David Cannadine, writing in 1987, perceived a decline:

At the universities, as in the schools, the belief that history provides an education, that it helps us understand ourselves in time, or even that it explains something of how the present world came into being, has all but vanished.⁴

Richard Evans, writing ten years later, also acknowledged the sense of crisis that appeared to be engulfing historians and history as a profession:

Such has been the power and influence of the postmodern critique of history that growing numbers of historians themselves are abandoning the search for truth, the belief in objectivity, and the quest for a scientific approach to the past. No wonder so many historians are worried about the future of their discipline.⁵

¹ Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 1997, p 178.

² *Ibid*, p 15.

³ Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, 1991, p 26.

⁴ David Cannadine, ‘British History: Past, Present and Future?’, *Past and Present*, 1987, vol 116, p 180.

⁵ Richard Evans, *In Defence of History*, 1997, p 4. See also Lawrence Stone, ‘History and Post-Modernism’, *Past and Present*, 1991, vol 131, pp 217–18.

However, many historians have sought to question the postmodern view and reassert the utility of history. For instance, Robert (now Lord) Skidelsky has argued why historians cannot indulge too much in the sorts of creativity that postmodernists suggest:

It is obviously true that history is socially constructed. The historian's mind fashions the materials of the past into a text; and the mind of the historian today is likely to be very different from that of the historian in 1900 or 1600. But this construction is not arbitrary. First, as I have argued, history has a definable subject matter, however fuzzy at the edges. Second, the historian is publicly accountable for his text. He is not free to say what he likes about the past. He makes claims based on evidence. This evidence is generally open to scrutiny by his fellow historians. There is wide, though not complete agreement, about what constitutes relevant evidence. Debates which in their origin may be intensely ideological tend to get narrowed down to questions of fact.⁶

Eric Hobsbawm has similarly sought to defend the notion that history is 'real':

The point from which historians must start, however far from it they may end, is the fundamental and, for them, absolutely central distinction between establishable fact and fiction, between historical statements based on evidence and those which are not.⁷

Richard Evans has agreed that some of the points raised by postmodernism have been beneficial to history as a whole and accepts that subjectivity is an inevitable and unavoidable part of writing history. However, he has maintained that:

... we really can, if we are very scrupulous and self-critical, find out how it all happened and reach some tenable though always less than final conclusions about what it all meant.⁸

2. Why Study History?

Historians have sought to make the case for studying history in a number of ways, ranging from its contribution to civic culture and the phrasing of social issues to the specific skills it can provide students and citizens more generally.

Arthur Marwick, in supporting the "necessity for history", argued the following in terms of history's wider cultural and social importance:

To those who pose the question, 'What is the use of history?' the crispest and most enlightening reply is to suggest that they try and imagine what everyday life would be like in a society in which no one knew any history. Imagination boggles, because it is only through knowledge of history that a society can have knowledge of itself. As a man without memory and self-knowledge is a man adrift, so a society without memory (or more correctly, without recollection) and self-knowledge would be a society adrift.⁹

⁶ *Independent*, 'Battle of Britain's Past Times: The Prime Minister has decreed a revival of 'national' history teaching', 22 August 1989.

⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, *On History*, 1997, p viii.

⁸ Richard Evans, *In Defence of History*, 1997, p 253.

⁹ Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, 1970, p 13.

E H Carr, in his wide-ranging consideration *What is History?*, while musing on the merits of various approaches to history and its relationship with other academic disciplines, observed the following:

The past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present; and we can fully understand the present only in the light of the past. To enable man to understand the society of the past, and to increase his mastery over the society of the present, is the dual function of history.¹⁰

John Tosh, writing on the various uses of history, sought to highlight its educational aspects:

... it trains the mind, enlarges the sympathies and provides a much-needed historical perspective on some of the most pressing problems of our time.¹¹

More recently, Tosh has argued that a deficit in historical understanding amongst society generally can have negative consequences:

Time and again, complex policy issues are placed before the public without adequate explanation of how they have come to assume their present shape, and without any hint of the possibilities which are disclosed by the record of the past.

... But on many of the topics to which historical perspective can profitably be applied the problem is not the tenacity of myth but the lack of any relevant knowledge at all.¹²

He has attempted to make the case for a reinvigorated 'public history' which might contribute to the quality of deliberative debate between citizens and politicians:

... historical scholarship has a great deal to offer the democratic culture of British society. Its contribution is best understood in the context of citizenship... Taking a considered and informed view on matters of public concern is fundamental to the actions expected of the citizen—in the polling booths, in political parties, and in issue-led association with other citizens. To be effective, representative democracy needs to be deliberative, for which a certain level of relevant knowledge and critical acumen is required... an enlarged scope for public history would be a major step towards these goals.¹³

Eric Hobsbawm has also noted that historians have a duty to promote a universalist history that displaces those narrower histories that can underpin the darker shades of nationalism. Reflecting on issues such as the Macedonian question and nationalist histories of the Balkans he has argued:

Unfortunately, as the situation in large parts of the world at the end of our millennium demonstrates, bad history is not harmless history. It is dangerous. The sentences typed on apparently innocuous keyboards may be sentences of death.¹⁴

¹⁰ E H Carr, *What is History*, 1987, p 55.

¹¹ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, 1991, p 29.

¹² John Tosh, '[Why History Matters](#)', *History and Policy Papers*, 2008.

¹³ *Ibid*, p 140.

¹⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *On History*, 1997, p 277.

Simon Schama, historian and adviser to the Government, has placed particular stress on the importance of history in reaching children with their attendant modern distractions:

Who is it that needs history the most? Our children, of course: the generations who will either pass on the memory of our disputatious liberty or be not much bothered about the doings of obscure ancestors, and go back to Facebook for an hour or four. Unless they can be won to history, their imagination will be held hostage in the cage of eternal Now: the flickering instant that's gone as soon as it has arrived. They will thus remain, as Cicero warned, permanent children, forever innocent of whence they have come and correspondingly unconcerned or, worse, fatalistic about where they might end up.¹⁵

In terms of classroom skills, the Historical Association in 1944 published *The Planning of a History Syllabus for Schools* which included the following rationale:

Moreover, in studying history, however simply, the pupil has to use his memory, his imagination, his reasoning power, and his judgment in collecting, examining, and correlating facts, in drawing conclusions... weighing evidence, and in forming general opinions which he must learn to regard as provisional only and as more or less probable rather than as true or untrue. In short, the study of history can and should give boys and girls some of the kind of knowledge indispensable both as a foundation for any real understanding of the world of to-day and as a basis for culture of any kind, some training in the quasi-inductive processes of thought most common in adult life, and some power of considering current events in the light of past experience.¹⁶

In 1999, the national curriculum for history for schools in England stated:

History fires pupils' curiosity about the past in Britain and the wider world. Pupils consider how the past influences the present, what past societies were like, how these societies organised their politics, and what beliefs and cultures influenced people's actions. As they do this, pupils develop a chronological framework for their knowledge of significant events and people. They see the diversity of human experience, and understand more about themselves as individuals and members of society. What they learn can influence their decisions about personal choices, attitudes and values. In history, pupils find evidence, weigh it up and reach their own conclusions. To do this they need to be able to research, sift through evidence, and argue for their point of view—skills that are prized in adult life.¹⁷

3. History in Schools: A Subject in Decline?

In recent years, a number of commentators and bodies have become concerned at what appears to be a reduction in the number of pupils opting to study history and of the quality of statutory history teaching for 5 to 14 year olds.

James Arthur, writing in 2000, noted that the provision of school history, even at primary school level, has not always been assured:

Despite repeated assurances from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) that it is committed to securing the place of history in the school curriculum, the Historical Association felt it necessary to launch yet another

¹⁵ *Guardian*, '[My Vision for History in Schools](#)', 9 November 2010.

¹⁶ Historical Association, [The Planning of a History Syllabus for Schools](#), 1944, pp 3–4.

¹⁷ Qualifications and Curriculum Board, [History: The National Curriculum for England](#), 1999, p 14.

Campaign for History in February 1998 (the Historical Association ran a previous campaign in 1988). The central objective of this new campaign was to secure the survival of school history through the promotion of the idea that every pupil between the ages of five and nineteen has a right to historical education. It is significant that the decision to launch this 'save history campaign' was made in 1997 before the Government decided to loosen the primary school curriculum by allowing schools to spend less time on certain subjects, including history, in order to concentrate a far greater proportion of their teaching time on literacy and numeracy. The consequence of this Government decision, whether intentional or not, has been to reduce the amount of history taught in the primary school and further reduce the need for primary schools to devote their scarce resources to the training of history subject leaders.¹⁸

Though in September 2000 statutory requirements regarding the teaching of history were reinstated at Key Stage 1–3, Arthur still thought that this potential ambivalence towards history in the school curriculum would adversely affect history teaching in the future.

A number of recent surveys have also appeared to question the position of history within the school curriculum. In March 2011, OFSTED published a report on school history, *History for All*, which presented a mixed picture. In terms of primary schools:

History teaching was good or better in most primary schools, and most pupils reached the end of Key Stage 2 with detailed knowledge derived from well-taught studies of individual topics.

... However, some pupils found it difficult to place the historical episodes they had studied within any coherent, long-term narrative. They knew about particular events, characters and periods but did not have an overview. Their chronological understanding was often underdeveloped and so they found it difficult to link developments together.

In part, this was because many primary teachers did not themselves have adequate subject knowledge beyond the specific elements of history that they taught. In addition the curriculum structure for primary schools was itself episodic and militated against pupils grasping such an overview. There is a pressing need for primary teachers to be better supported in their professional development in history, and for the curriculum to ensure that pupils study overview as well as in-depth topics so that they can develop a coherent chronological framework for the separate periods and events that they study.¹⁹

In terms of secondary schools, it noted:

In the secondary schools visited, effective teaching by well-qualified and highly competent teachers enabled the majority of students to develop knowledge and understanding in depth. It also helped students to develop their ability to support, evaluate and challenge their own views and to challenge the views of others. Many students displayed a healthy respect for historical evidence, along with the skills to use it robustly and critically to support their explanations and judgements. In these ways the teaching of history is helping pupils to develop important and broadly applicable skills.

¹⁸ James Arthur, 'What are the Issues in Teaching History?', in James Arthur and Robert Phillips (eds) *Issues in Teaching History*, 2000, p 1.

¹⁹ OFSTED, *History for All*, March 2011, p 4.

However, decisions about curriculum structures within schools have placed constraints on history, and other foundation subjects, at Key Stage 3. In 14 of the 58 secondary schools visited between 2008 and 2010, whole-school curriculum changes were having a negative impact on teaching and learning in history at Key Stage 3. Some of these changes included introducing a two-year Key Stage 3 course, assimilating history into a humanities course or establishing a competency-based or skills-based course in Year 7 in place of history and other foundation subjects. Where these developments had taken place, curriculum time for teaching had been reduced and history was becoming marginalised.

Specifically in terms of history taken at GCSE level it stated:

Patterns of entry for GCSE history varied considerably between different types of school: only 30 percent of students in maintained schools took the subject in 2010 compared with 48 percent in independent schools. In academies, the proportion was lower still at 20 percent.²⁰

The Historical Association, which seeks to promote history and whose membership includes history teachers, has conducted several recent surveys of history teachers. In 2011, its survey of primary schools found some positives:

There is much to celebrate in primary history; pupils are taught by enthusiastic teachers who plan for progression. Pupils are taught a wide range of topics. Our survey matches closely the most recent reports on the teaching of History in English schools (OFSTED, 2007 and 2011). Children are receiving a sound foundation in the narrative of British history. The History National Curriculum is being taught, with British, European and World History all featuring—this is not a narrow curriculum confined to the teaching of Henry VIII and Hitler as has been claimed for secondary school history.²¹

However, it also highlighted a number of concerns:

The survey also identified major shortcomings in initial teacher training and continuing professional development of serving teachers. The overwhelming majority of trainee primary teachers have minimal training in how to teach history. Similarly, it paints a very stark picture of continuing professional development—in terms of responses 67 percent did not know of or have a history advisor in their area; 49 percent said that they had received little or no training for subject leadership and 90 percent identified an absence of subject specific history CPD [Continuing Professional Development].²²

Its survey of secondary schools found a reduction in the number of specialist history teachers and in the amount of time devoted to the subject:

For two thirds of young people their only access to specialist history teaching has been during Key Stage 3. This specialist expertise is fast disappearing in some schools, leaving many young people with little or no teaching from history graduates trained to teach the subject. In both comprehensives and new academies in Year 7, approximately 60 percent of respondents report some degree of non-specialist teaching, a proportion which rises to 65 percent in older

²⁰ OFSTED, [History for All](#), March 2011, pp 4–5.

²¹ Historical Association, [The Historical Association—Primary History Survey \(England\): History 3–11](#), April 2011, p 26.

²² *Ibid*, p 5.

style academies. Even in grammar schools and independent schools around a third report some non-specialist teaching. The loss of specialist teaching is most marked in this first year of secondary school: nearly a fifth of comprehensives and more than a fifth of independent schools and new academies report that over 45 percent of classes are taught by non-specialists.

... There is still a worrying trend in the numbers of schools reducing curriculum time in Year 7, particularly among the older academies (those originally established in areas of socio-economic disadvantage). Over 40 percent of these schools reported a decrease in curriculum time allocated to the subject—the first time in the three years the Survey has run that reported decreases in time allocation for any type of school are more frequent than answers showing no change.²³

It suggested that history teaching was becoming a two-tier system of provision:

In Year 10, when all students will be following some sort of Key Stage 4 programme (including GCSEs, BTECs and Diplomas), three quarters of old style academies and one third of comprehensive schools report that history GCSE attracts only 30 percent or fewer students. Whereas at the other end of the spectrum around 40 percent of grammar schools and independent schools have more than 60 percent of their Year 10 students taking history. Overall slightly more schools were reporting an increase in history GCSE numbers, but the emerging picture suggests that some young people are still being put into more restricted “pathways” and that these young people are more likely to be in areas of greater social deprivation.²⁴

Tristram Hunt, writing in the *Guardian*, reflected on what such surveys might mean:

Our national story is being privatised, with 48 percent of independent pupils taking the subject compared with 30 percent of state school entrants. And academy schools, so admired by government ministers, are among the worst offenders.²⁵

Simon Schama was also concerned about an emergent cultural divide:

What emerges most startlingly from testimonies of hundreds of teachers is that at a moment fraught with the possibility of social and cultural division, we are, in effect, creating two nations of young Britons: those, on the one hand, who grow up with a sense of our shared memory as a living, urgently present body of knowledge, something that informs their own lives and shapes their sense of community; and those on the other hand who have been encouraged to treat it as little more than ornamental polishing for the elite.²⁶

²³ Historical Association, [History in Secondary Schools 2011 \(Survey\)](#) [Summary], September 2011, pp 1–2. See also Historical Association, [Qualified History Teachers: A Thing of the Past?](#), September 2011.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p 2.

²⁵ *Guardian*, [‘If we have no history, we have no future’](#), 28 August 2011.

²⁶ *Guardian*, [‘My Vision for History in Schools’](#), 9 November 2010.

Niall Ferguson, writing in the *Financial Times*, noted the apparent paradox that while history appeared more popular it was declining in schools:

History, it might be said, has never been more popular. Yet there is a painful paradox at the very same time: that it has never been less popular in British schools.

History is not a compulsory part of the British secondary school curriculum after the age of 14, in marked contrast to nearly all other European countries. The most recent statistics for England and Wales indicate the scale of the problem. In 2009 a total of 219,809 candidates sat the GCSE in history—just 4 percent of all GCSEs taken. More students sat the design and technology GCSE (305,809).

At A-level the story is worse. There were 49,071 A-level history candidates in 2009, 5.8 percent of all A-levels taken (down from 6.4 percent in 1992). More candidates took psychology (52,872) than history.²⁷

4. How is History Currently Taught in Schools?

History is currently a statutory part of the national curriculum at Key Stage 1 (5–7 year olds), Key Stage 2 (7–11 year olds) and Key Stage 3 (11–14 year olds) in maintained schools in England. History is not a statutory part of the national curriculum at Key Stage 4 (14–16 year olds). Independent schools are not required to follow the national curriculum. Education is a devolved matter in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.²⁸

4.1 History at Key Stage 1 (5–7 Year Olds)

The national curriculum for England states that at Key Stage 1 pupils learn about people's lives and lifestyles. They find out about significant men, women, children and events from the recent and more distant past, including those from both Britain and the wider world. They listen and respond to stories and use sources of information to help them ask and answer questions and learn how the past is different from the present. In terms of specific skills, children are expected to: acquire a chronological understanding of events and objects; develop an understanding of events, people and changes in the past; identify the different ways in which the past is represented; find out about the past from a range of sources of information; ask and answer questions about the past; select from their knowledge of history and communicate it in a variety of ways (eg talking, writing, using ICT).²⁹

4.2 History at Key Stage 2 (7–11 Year Olds)

The curriculum at Key Stage 2 seeks to build on the skills of Key Stage 1. Pupils learn about significant people, events and places from both the recent and more distant past and learn about change and continuity in their own area, in Britain and in other parts of the world. They are required to look at history in a variety of ways, for example from political, economic, technological and scientific, social, religious, cultural or aesthetic

²⁷ *Financial Times*, 'Too much Hitler and the Henrys: What's wrong with the teaching of history in Britain?', 10 April 2010.

²⁸ For the Welsh History National Curriculum Key Stages 1–3 see: National Assembly for Wales, [History in the National Curriculum in Wales](#) (2000). For information on how history is covered in the Scottish National Curriculum see: Scottish Government, [Social Studies: Principles and Practice](#) (2008). For information on the Curriculum in Northern Ireland see [Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment](#).

²⁹ Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, [History: The National Curriculum for England](#), 1999, p 16.

perspectives. They also need to use different sources of information to help them investigate the past both in depth and in overview, using dates and historical vocabulary to describe events, people and developments and also learn that the past can be represented and interpreted in different ways. The curriculum stipulates that these skills should be developed through local history study, three British history studies, a European history study and a world history study. In terms of British history, this includes: the Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings; Britain and the wider world in Tudor times; and either Victorian Britain or Britain since 1930. It also includes aspects of the histories of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, where appropriate, and about the history of Britain in its European and wider world context, in these periods. For the European history study it states that pupils should study “the way of life, beliefs and achievements of the people living in Ancient Greece and the influence of their civilisation on the world today”. For a world history study it points to a study of the key features, including the everyday lives of men, women and children, of a past society selected from: Ancient Egypt, Ancient Sumer, the Assyrian Empire, the Indus Valley, the Maya, Benin, or the Aztecs. The national curriculum goes on to give examples of how these aspects of Key Stage 2 can be delivered.³⁰

4.3 History at Key Stage 3 (11–14 Year Olds)

In 2005, the Government asked the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) to review the secondary curriculum at Key Stage 3 with the principal aim of further reducing the amount of prescribed content in order to give teachers more time and space to support more personalised learning.³¹

The new Key Stage 3 National Curriculum was published in 2007 and became statutory from September 2008.³² In terms of History at Key Stage 3, this necessitates that pupils understand several key concepts: chronological understanding; cultural, ethnic and religious diversity; change and continuity; cause and consequence; significance of people and events; and interpretation. It also involves three processes. Historical enquiry entails the ability to identify and investigate specific historical questions and issues, both making and testing hypotheses and reflecting critically on them. Using evidence seeks to enable pupils to identify, select and use a range of historical sources and evaluate them in the course of reaching reasoned conclusions. Finally, communicating about the past requires pupils to be able to present and organise coherent, structured and substantiated accounts and explanations about the past using chronological conventions and historical vocabulary.

In terms of content, History at Key Stage 3 aims to teach history through a combination of overview, thematic and depth studies allied to a chronological framework of major events, changes and developments in British, European and world history across medieval, early modern, industrial and 20th century periods. For British history, this includes: the development of political power from the middle ages to the 20th century (eg Crown and Parliament and democracy); the relationship between the nations of Britain; the impact of the movement and settlement of diverse peoples to, from and within the British isles; changes in the lives, beliefs, ideas and attitudes of British people and the impact of technology, economic development, war, religion and culture; the

³⁰ Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, [History: The National Curriculum for England](#), 1999, pp 17–19.

³¹ House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, [National Curriculum](#), HC 344 of session 2008–09, April 2009, p 13.

³² Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, [History Programme of Study for Key Stage 3 and Attainment Target](#), 2007. For previous Key Stage 3 Curriculum for History see: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, [History: The National Curriculum for England](#), 1999, pp 17–19.

development of trade, colonisation, industrialisation and technology and the impact both in Britain and overseas of the British Empire (eg the slave trade and decolonisation). European and world history seeks to highlight the significance of political, social, cultural and religious, technological and economic developments on past European and world societies. It also focuses on the changing nature of conflict and cooperation between countries and peoples and the lasting impact on national, ethnic, racial, cultural or religious issues. Specific events include the nature and impact of the two World Wars and the Holocaust and role of international institutions in resolving conflicts.

4.4 History at GCSE

GCSE history content is regulated by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). The QCA states that syllabus specifications should enable students to:

- actively engage in the process of historical enquiry to develop as effective and independent learners, and as critical and reflective thinkers with enquiring minds;
- develop their knowledge and coherent understanding of selected periods, societies and aspects of history;
- develop an awareness of how the past has been represented, interpreted and accorded significance for different reasons and purposes;
- develop the ability to ask relevant questions about the past and to investigate them critically using a range of sources in their historical context;
- organise and communicate their historical knowledge and understanding in creative and different ways and reach substantiated judgements; and
- recognise that their historical knowledge, understanding and skills help them understand the present and also provide them with a basis for their role as responsible citizens, as well as for the possible further study of history.³³

In terms of content, the QCA subject criteria states that GCSE content should build on history at Key Stage 3 with themes, topics and periods illustrating the key individuals, societies, events, developments and, where appropriate, the social, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity of the societies studied and the experiences of people in those societies. It should seek to highlight the links between the key individuals, societies, events, developments and issues specified and the present. It must include “a substantial (a minimum of 25 percent) and coherent element of British history and/or the history of England, Scotland, Ireland or Wales” and show change and/or development over a period of time sufficient to demonstrate understanding of the process of change, both long term and short term. It should involve at least two different scales, such as local, national, European, international and global. Content could also include the study of how history links to related areas including the heritage, tourist and media sectors.³⁴

³³ QCA, [GCSE Subject Criteria for History](#), December 2007, pp 3–4.

³⁴ *Ibid*, pp 5–6.

4.5 History at GCE AS and A Level

The QCA's subject criteria for GCE AS and A level history states that syllabus specifications should encourage students to:

- develop their interest in and enthusiasm for history and an understanding of its intrinsic value and significance;
- acquire an understanding of different identities within society and an appreciation of social, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity through the study of aspects of British and non-British history;
- build on their understanding of the past through experiencing a broad and balanced course of study;
- improve as effective and independent learners and as critical and reflective thinkers with curious and enquiring minds;
- develop the ability to ask relevant and significant questions about the past and to research them;
- acquire an understanding of the nature of historical study, for example that history is concerned with judgements based on available evidence and that historical judgements may be provisional;
- develop their use and understanding of historical terms, concepts and skills;
- make links and draw comparisons within and/or across different periods and aspects of the past; and
- organise and communicate their historical knowledge and understanding in different ways, arguing a case and reaching substantiated judgements.³⁵

In terms of depth and breadth of content, the QCA requires students to study the history of more than one country or state or the history of more than one period. This includes considering aspects of the past in breadth through periods or themes, but also in depth. It requires students to appreciate significant individuals, societies, events, developments and issues within a broad historical context as well as how developments affected different groups within the societies studied. Also studied are a range of appropriate historical perspectives (eg aesthetic, cultural, economic, ethnic, political, religious, scientific, social or technological). The content of the course should involve a substantial (a minimum of 25 percent) and coherent element of British history and/or the history of England, Scotland, Ireland or Wales and examine the impact of change and/or development over a period of time sufficient to demonstrate understanding of the process of change, both long term (at least 100 years) and short term.³⁶

4.6 The English Baccalaureate

The English Baccalaureate (EB) introduced in 2010 seeks to recognise pupils who have secured a C grade or better across a core of academic subjects: English, mathematics,

³⁵ QCA, [GCE AS and A Level Subject Criteria for History](#), December 2006, pp 3–4.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p 4.

history or geography, the sciences and a language. Though it is not currently a qualification, the Government is “examining possible arrangements for issuing certificates”. One reason for developing the EB has been the “decline in the opportunity to take some core subjects, such as modern foreign languages, history and geography at Key Stage 4”, a situation which “disproportionately affects pupils from the poorest backgrounds or attending schools in disadvantaged areas”. History has been chosen, along with other core academic subjects, as a subject most likely to be required or preferred for entry to degree courses and one that will keep the most options open.³⁷

5. A New History Curriculum?

On 20 January 2011, the Secretary of State for Education announced that there would be a review of the whole national curriculum which would seek to: replace the current curriculum with one based on the best school systems in the world, providing a world-class resource for teachers and children; consider what subjects should be compulsory at what age; and consider what children should be taught in the main subjects at what age.³⁸

The review is divided into two phases. The first will concentrate in particular on the core subjects of English, mathematics and science, whilst considering whether other subjects, including history, should be part of the national curriculum, with statutory programmes of study, and if so, at which key stages. For any subjects that are not recommended to be national curriculum subjects in the future, the review will advise on whether there should be non-statutory programmes of study available at particular key stages, and/or whether those subjects—or any aspects of them—should nevertheless be compulsory but with what is taught being decided at local level. Phase 1 began in January 2011 with a call for evidence which ended in April 2011. Recommendations from phase 1, including draft programmes of study, will be provided to ministers for consideration by autumn 2011, and there will be a public consultation on the draft programmes of study in early 2012. In July 2011, the Minister of State for Schools, Nick Gibb, revealed that as part of the evidence gathering exercise, the Government had received 5,800 responses, of which more than 2,500 related to history.³⁹

Phase 2 will focus on the development of statutory and non-statutory programmes of study, as appropriate, in relation to all other subjects where it is decided at the conclusion of phase 1 that programmes of study are needed in the future. This second phase of work will begin early in 2012, with recommendations including draft programmes of study to be provided to ministers for consideration by autumn 2012. There will be a public consultation on the draft programmes of study in early 2013. The intention is that the new programmes of study for English, mathematics, science and physical education will be prepared and available to schools by September 2012, with teaching in maintained schools to commence from September 2013. New programmes of study for all other subjects that are either to form part of the new national curriculum or to have non-statutory programmes of study will be available to schools by September 2013, with teaching in maintained schools to commence from September 2014.

³⁷ Department for Education, [The English Baccalaureate](#), 28 June 2011. See also: Department for Education, [English Baccalaureate—FAQs](#).

³⁸ Department for Education, [National Curriculum Review Launched](#), 20 January 2011.

³⁹ HC *Hansard*, 11 June 2011, [col 14](#).

6. Which History to Teach and How to Teach it?

For much of the 20th century history appears to have been taught largely unchanged. Chris Husbands, Alison Kitson and Anna Pendry argue that:

... history teaching in schools, and particularly in grammar schools, was dominated by the 'great tradition'. In this 'great tradition' the history teacher's role was 'didactically active'; it was to give pupils the facts of historical knowledge and to ensure through repeated short tests that they had learned them. The pupil's role was passive; history was a 'received' subject. The body of knowledge to be taught was also clearly defined.⁴⁰

However, this approach to history began to be challenged in the 1970s and 1980s, as Christine Counsell has documented:

During the 1970s and 1980s, history teachers, curriculum developers and researchers completely reconceptualised school history... Instead of emphasising the cumulative memorizing of a body of facts, curriculum developers produced and researchers analysed new cognitive domains that were deemed to be more closely derivative of the practice of the academic discipline itself.⁴¹

A debate opened up in the late 1980s which appeared to draw on the divergence between these two approaches to history, which became characterized by some as 'fact versus skills'. This was particularly apparent when the National Curriculum History Working Group, which had been set up by the Conservative Government in 1989 to make recommendations on the history national curriculum, published its final report in April 1990. The report amongst its recommendations noted the importance of bringing together both these aspects of history in the classroom:

... to have integrity the study of history must be grounded in a solid knowledge of the past: must employ vigorous historical method—the way in which historians carry out their task—and must involve a range of interpretations and explanations... together, these elements make an organic whole: if any one of them is missing the outcome is not history.⁴²

Juliet Gardiner, commenting on the report and the accompanying debate, thought that while many welcomed the report for "being a fair and clear basis for history teaching in schools, it was not without its critics".⁴³ For instance, Robert Skidelsky and others produced an alternative view of how history should be taught, which questioned the lack of prescribed facts to be taught under the report's recommendations.⁴⁴ Writing in the *Independent* in August 1989, Skidelsky set out his opposition to the history GCSE:

The National Criteria for GCSE refuse to specify a 'minimum core of content'. In other words, no British history has to be taught for GCSE. Some pupils are doing exotic syllabuses such as the history of medicine, taught by teachers who know

⁴⁰ Chris Husbands, Alison Kitson and Anna Pendry, *Understanding History Teaching*, 2003, p 8. See also David Sylvester, 'Change and Continuity in History Teaching 1900–93' in Hilary Bourdillon (ed), *Teaching History*, 1994, pp 9–26.

⁴¹ Christine Counsell, 'Historical Knowledge and Historical Skills: A Distracting Dichotomy' in James Arthur and Robert Phillips (eds), *Issues in Teaching History*, 2000, p 54.

⁴² Department of Education and Science, *National Curriculum, History Working Group: Final Report*, April 1990.

⁴³ Juliet Gardiner, *The History Debate*, 1990, p 3.

⁴⁴ Robert Skidelsky et al, *The National Curriculum: GCSE History—An Alternative Approach*, April 1989.

nothing about medicine. At the same time, no GCSE candidates in this country are allowed to study British history over a large span of historical time. 'Learning by doing' has become entrenched in the form of projects and coursework assignments, while chronology and factual recall have become marginalised.⁴⁵

Conversely, others thought that what was proposed contained too much factual content. Keith Jenkins, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1990, pointed to the inclusion of what he saw as information that was sometimes "intimidatingly formidable".⁴⁶

The debate over the framing of the history curriculum in the late 1980s also touched on the content of what should be taught. Thus Keith Robbins, when considering debates about how much British and European history should be included and which British history this would entail, insisted that: "The shaping of content and the framework of argument are themselves political decisions, in the widest sense of the term".⁴⁷ Janet L Nelson was thus concerned that European history had drawn the "short straw" in terms of curriculum content, with medieval European history in particular being omitted. She warned that this risked denying pupils "their roots and inheritances that are European".⁴⁸ Other writers have suggested that arguments over the teaching of history often reflect deeper ideological differences. Keith Crawford, writing in 1995 on the debates about curriculum content, observed:

On one level they appear as modest disagreements over the balance to be struck between British history and a pluralist content base and between historical knowledge and historical skills and understanding. On another level they can be interpreted as attempts to control definitions of the past designed to justify political action, promote particular social trends and develop economic doctrines.⁴⁹

More recently, these debates on how history should be taught and what content should be included have re-surfaced. Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, in his speech to the Conservative Party Conference in October 2010, set out what he thought was wrong with the current history curriculum:

One of the under-appreciated tragedies of our time has been the sundering of our society from its past.

Children are growing up ignorant of one of the most inspiring stories I know—the history of our United Kingdom.

Our history has moments of pride, and shame, but unless we fully understand the struggles of the past we will not properly value the liberties of the present.

The current approach we have to history denies children the opportunity to hear our island story. Children are given a mix of topics at primary, a cursory run through Henry VIII and Hitler at secondary and many give up the subject at 14,

⁴⁵ *Independent*, 'Battle of Britain's Past Times: The Prime Minister has decreed a revival of 'national' history teaching', 22 August 1989.

⁴⁶ Keith Jenkins, 'The Future of the Past', *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 June 1990.

⁴⁷ Keith Robbins, *The History Debate*, 1990, p 25.

⁴⁸ Janet L Nelson, *The History Debate*, 1990, p 56.

⁴⁹ Keith Crawford, 'A History of the Right: The Battle for Control of National Curriculum History 1989–1994', *British Journal of Education Studies*, December 1995, vol 43, no 4, p 439.

without knowing how the vivid episodes of our past become a connected narrative. Well, this trashing of our past has to stop.⁵⁰

He also announced that Simon Schama had agreed to advise the Government on a revised history curriculum. Earlier, in May 2010, he was also reported as having asked Niall Ferguson to help re-write the history curriculum.⁵¹ In October 2010, Michael Gove said the following concerning the balance between skills and content in the teaching of history:

It is critical that we ensure that every child has a proper spine of knowledge—the narrative of the history of these islands. Without that, the skills of comparison and of examining primary and secondary sources and drawing the appropriate conclusions, are meaningless. Without that spine, history cannot stand up and take its place properly in the national curriculum.⁵²

Simon Schama, writing in the *Guardian*, set out his views on the deficiencies of the current teaching of history, particularly British history:

My own anecdotal evidence suggests that right across the secondary school system our children are being short-changed of the patrimony of their story, which is to say the lineaments of the whole story, for there can be no true history that refuses to span the arc, no coherence without chronology. A pedagogy that denies that completeness to children fatally misunderstands the psychology of their receptiveness, patronises their capacity for wanting the epic of long time; the hunger for plenitude.⁵³

He thought that this sweep should at the very least include six key areas: the murder of Thomas Beckett and its portrayal of the conflict between “religious and royal/secular ideas of law and sovereignty”; the Black Death and the Peasants Revolt in the reign of Richard II indicating social trauma and social rebellion; the execution of Charles I, the Protectorate and the Restoration; Britain’s colonial role in India; William Gladstone, Charles Parnell and the Irish wars; and the British Navy, the opium wars and China.

Niall Ferguson, who, as noted above, was asked to help re-write the history curriculum, believed that there “should be a compulsory chronological framework over the entire period from entering secondary school right through to sixth form”. He was critical of the dominance of curriculums that focused on the Nazis:

According to 2006 exam data, 51 percent of GCSE candidates and a staggering 80 percent of A-level candidates study the history of the Third Reich. As someone who wrote his DPhil thesis on inter-war Germany, I yield to no one in my respect for the historiography of Adolf Hitler’s rise and fall. But there can be no justification for this excessive focus on the history of a single European country over a period of just a dozen years.⁵⁴

Instead he thought that all students at GCSE and A-level should “cover at least one medieval, one early modern and one modern paper” with an “over-arching story—a

⁵⁰ Epolitix.com, ‘[Education Secretary Michael Gove’s Speech to the Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham](#)’, 5 October 2010.

⁵¹ *Guardian*, ‘[Rightwing Historian Niall Ferguson given School Curriculum Role](#)’, 30 May 2010.

⁵² *HC Hansard*, 11 October 2010, [col 22](#).

⁵³ *Guardian*, ‘[My Vision for History in Schools](#)’, 9 November 2010.

⁵⁴ *Financial Times*, ‘Too much Hitler and the Henrys: What’s Wrong with the Teaching of History in Britain?’, 10 April 2010.

meta-narrative” called “western ascendancy”. He argued that this should not be seen as an attempt to “slip covert imperialist apologia into the curriculum”, rather as a way of allowing “students to study world history without falling into the trap of relativism, ie arguing as if the Ashanti Empire were in some way the equal of the British Empire”:

Western ascendancy was not all good, any more than it was all bad. It was simply what happened and, of all the things that happened over the past five centuries, it was the thing that changed the world the most. That so few British schoolchildren are even aware of this is deplorable.⁵⁵

Susie Measure, writing in the *Independent*, was also critical of what she saw as the skills-based bias of school history but also of the over-use of ‘empathy’:

The fault lies in the national curriculum’s skills-centred obsession, which decrees it more crucial for a pupil to imagine the privations a soldier faced in the trenches than to name any of the battles he fought. It wants students to emerge able to empathise their way through coursework rather than retain any actual knowledge that might serve them in later life.

The prescription to teach history through a politically correct prism—which emphasises concepts such as slavery and imperialism, instead of dwelling on the feats of those historical figures who make up the narrative that got us to today—has stripped the past of much meaning. Where pupils do pause for breath during the odd isolated era like the Tudors or the Nazis—the “Henrys and Hitler”, as those critical of the current syllabus have dubbed the periods—they wind up only knowing about a handful of events.⁵⁶

Richard Evans, writing in the *London Review of Books*, has questioned whether the current history curriculum is as deficient as it has been portrayed:

The existing national history curriculum, taking children up to the age of 14, aims to give them a grasp of chronology, a ‘knowledge and understanding of events, people and changes in the past’, basic principles of historical interpretation and inquiry, and elementary skills of communication, ‘developed through teaching the content relating to local, national, European and world history’. Study of a variety of topics is intended to assist children’s ‘spiritual development, through helping pupils to appreciate the achievements of past societies, and to understand the motivation of individuals who made sacrifices for a particular cause’. Children have to learn about the social, cultural, religious and ethnic diversity of the societies they study, which include the Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings, two later periods of British history, Ancient Greece and its influence, and one non-European society selected from among Ancient Egypt, Sumer, the Assyrian Empire, the Indus Valley, the Maya, Benin or the Aztecs.

There seems to be plenty of factual content in all this, and plenty of kings and queens too. The examples the curriculum provides for teaching history to children from seven to 11 make mention of (by my count) 36 significant individuals, ranging from Boudicca and Caractacus to Livingstone and Brunel. From 11 to 14, children study the whole sweep of British history from 1066 to 1900 in three courses.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ *Independent*, [‘Never has our history been known by so few’](#), 29 August 2010.

... Why Gove and his allies should think that facts and names play no part in all this is a mystery.⁵⁷

He was critical of Simon Schama's appointment: "But what makes good TV doesn't necessarily make for good teaching. A return to narrative in the classroom—to passive consumption instead of active critical engagement—is more likely to be a recipe for boredom and disaffection". He suspected that it reflected a shared approach to history:

Gove, Schama and other advocates of the new Britain-centred narrative are all essentially proponents of the Whig interpretation of history... Gove's vision of 'our island story' is about examining the 'struggles of the past' to see how they brought about 'the liberties of the present'. Similarly, Schama wants younger generations to 'pass on the memory of our disputatious liberty' to their descendants.

He sought to reassert the need for historical skills to be aligned with knowledge:

It is possible to teach actual skills only if history is taught in depth, and that means a focus on a limited number of specialised topics. Of course, students need to know at least in outline the longer-term context of what they study. But if you make this context the core element in the curriculum, you are sacrificing depth for breadth, and you will end up with a superficial gallop through the centuries.

Evans also thought that disagreements over content reflected deeper differences:

The present curriculum for children from five to 14 offers an image of Britishness that pays at least some attention to the multiethnic composition of British society. Its critics want to replace this with a narrowly nationalistic identity built on myths about the 'British' past, as if there was such a thing before the Act of Union between England and Scotland in 1707—or, indeed, as many Scots (or for that matter Welsh) would argue, after it. It makes far more sense to teach British children of South Asian or Afro-Caribbean background about the parts of the world where their families originated—the history of the Mughal Empire, or of Benin or Oyo, for example—than to teach them about Alfred and the cakes or Drake and the Armada.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Richard Evans, '[The Wonderfulness of Us \(the Tory Interpretation of History\)](#)', *London Review of Books*, March 2011, vol 33, no 6.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* See also Laura Penny, '[Michael Gove and the Imperialists](#)', *New Statesman*, 1 June 2010.

