

# What time does the tune start? :

## From thinking about 'sense of period' to modelling history at Key Stage 3

A 'sense of period' is the contextual backdrop to the study of any aspect of history. As experienced historians, we can tend to take for granted both our structural map of the past and our rich descriptions of different periods. The ability to draw generalisations about certain periods, is arguably just as vital as recognising the diversity within that period. Yet how is such a sense acquired? Ian Dawson is by now very familiar to readers of *Teaching History*. In *TH130, Picturing History Edition*, he explored thematic stories and challenged traditions of chronological teaching. In this article, Dawson explores a definition of the term 'sense of period.' He takes us through some familiar activities that perhaps haven't worked so well in the past and suggests alternative questions and approaches.

The idea for this article came from my puzzlement over the idea of 'a sense of period.' It is a sense I use a lot; from mulling over the motives of fifteenth century men and women, to guessing the dates of effigies before I read the information boards. Sense of period is also integral to the perspective history provides on our own time and lives. That perspective requires awareness of the continuities and disparities between ourselves and people of other times; what we have in common with our forefathers and what we do that would leave them utterly perplexed.

What intrigues me is that I have never been taught to develop a sense of period. It seemingly happened while I wasn't looking. Nor have I ever taught anyone to develop their own. And yet, it is in the 2008 National Curriculum, so I really should think about how to teach it. I realise that I need to be much clearer in my mind about what 'sense of period' is, so I will start at the beginning by trying to define it.<sup>1</sup>

### What is 'sense of period'?

In Penelope Lively's *The Driftway*, Paul, full of resentment of his new stepmother, runs away from home. He hitches a lift from the driver of a horse-drawn caravan which follows the Driftway – a centuries-old drovers' road. While they travel, Paul glimpses scenes from the past; a Neolithic hunter, a soldier fleeing a Civil War battle, an incompetent highwayman and others. These encounters chip away at his resentment until ...

*'Paul looked out into the darkness. The silence concealed the landscape he knew: the neat, orderly landscape of hedgerows, shapely trees, hills lifted to meet sky and cloud, fields, streams, cottages, a landscape that seemed set and unchanging in all but the variety of season, the variety of colour and light. But it was not. Beneath it lay all these other things: people working, fighting, dying. The fog rolled back before the cart, revealing a tree, a twist in the track, a clump of cow-parsley heads splayed against the hedge: he imagined other eyes in other times looking at the same things, feeling the same feelings, thinking .. No, not thinking the same things. That would be different.'*

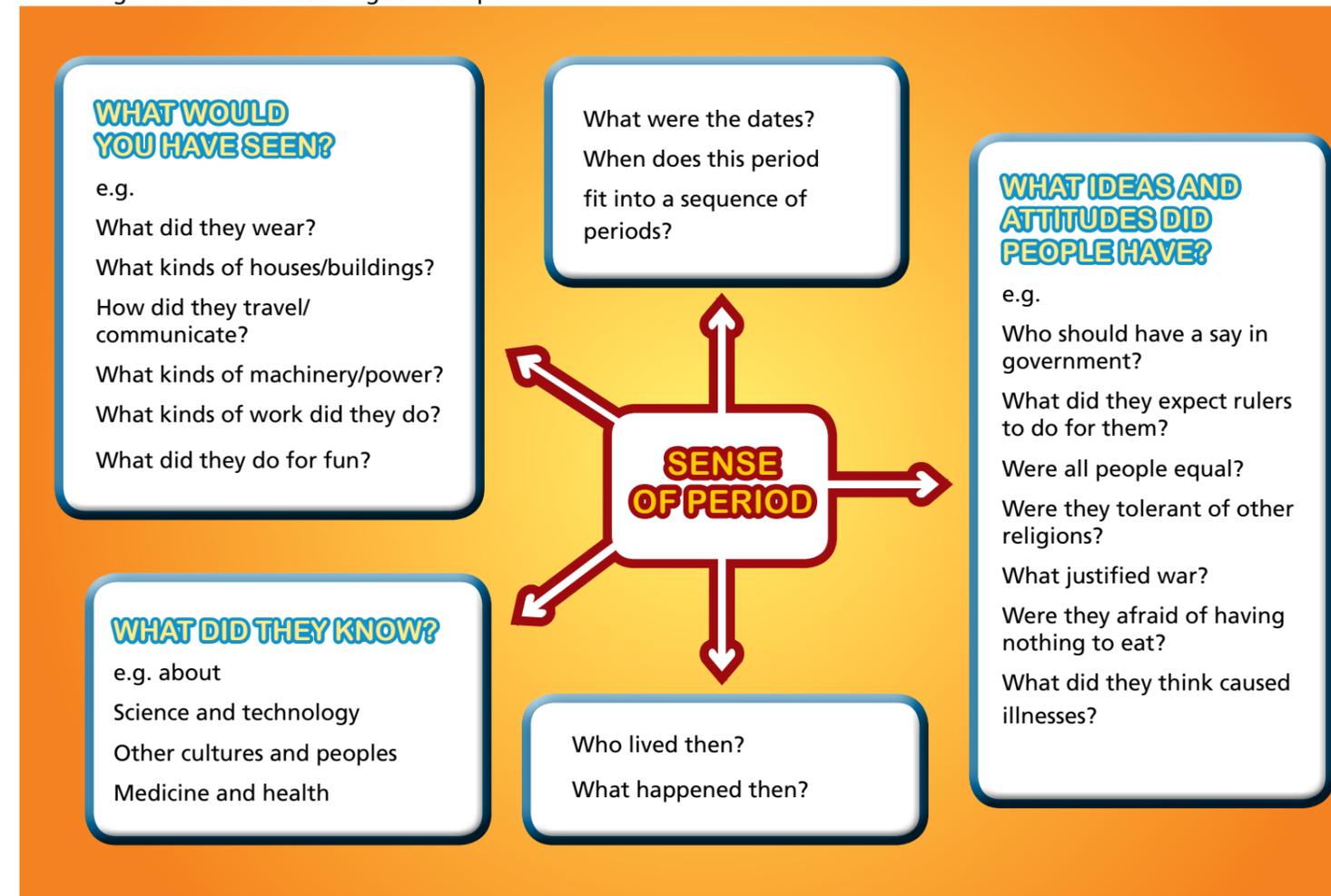
*'You can't know how they thought,' he said, 'Not really.'*

*I s'pose not, son. But we should try.'*<sup>2</sup>

I love the last words, 'we should try.' However, for this article what is important is that something, clicking in Paul's tired brain when he thinks 'No, not thinking the same things. That would be different.' Paul is discovering a sense of period; an awareness of the disparities between people in the past

**Ian Dawson**  
Ian Dawson is SHP Publications Director, a National Teaching Fellow and creator of [www.thinkinghistory.co.uk](http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk)

Figure 1: Ideas for defining sense of period



and present. And this isn't just disparities in concrete things such as clothes, buildings and transport. Paul's new 'sense of period' is more complex, it is about ideas and attitudes; the thoughts in people's minds at various times in the past.<sup>3</sup>

So when defining 'sense of period' we need to include both the physical and the mental aspects of life in the past. Figure 1 offers a suggested outline of the various aspects of 'sense of period' which could be used to promote discussion in history departments.

### Confession time: how to tackle 'sense of period' badly.

In the past, I had a vague awareness that I needed activities to develop pupils' sense of period but the key word here is 'vague.' I never thought it through carefully. There are some good individual activities on developing a sense of period in the pages of *Teaching History* but sometimes we can learn more from less successful efforts, so here are two activities of mine that, in practice, do not achieve much.<sup>4</sup>

#### 1. Spot the Anachronism activities

You know the sort of thing: 'Can you spot the anachronisms in the picture?' e.g. the Roman soldier wearing a watch. Fun, possibly, maybe even useful for filling ten minutes, but, as an

individual activity, it is of no value because it does not lead to any other learning. It can only have value if used to start students thinking about contrasts between different periods. Areas for questioning might include, what other concrete differences can you suggest? Given these concrete differences between past and present what questions do you want to ask about the ideas and attitudes of people at that time? How far do you think their ideas differed to those people have today, or to those people in other periods had? It is a way of helping students to begin constructing Figure 1 themselves.

#### 2. Concluding 'ideas and attitudes' activities

Imagine you have spent time investigating the Middle Ages. You might pull threads together with an activity such as that in Figure 2, an abbreviated version of a textbook activity that I now feel unhappy with. This activity seems more demanding than spotting anachronisms because it deals with ideas, not 'things', and because it is distinguishing between ideas within the Middle Ages rather than simply between the Middle Ages and today. Yet when published, it was placed at the wrong place in the learning sequence – the end. Students can do it, but what follows? Where does the activity take them? For this activity to be of value it needed to be at the beginning to help students ask questions about the ideas and attitudes of the period and then deepen and use their understanding in the ensuing enquiry.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 2: Into the mind of a medieval villager – an abbreviated version of a textbook activity

## Into the mind of a medieval villager

1. Who was thinking each of the thoughts below? Fill in the grid with the letters of the thoughts but be careful – some thoughts go in more than one column!

Thoughts of people from 1100	Thoughts of people from 1500	Thoughts of people from today

**A**

Only another week and we can get the harvest in. If we get more rain and we have another bad harvest people will go hungry this winter. Some folk may even starve to death.

**B**

Thanks be to God for the good monks at the monastery. If there's no work or food prices are high we depend on them to give us help.

**C**

I've heard my grandfather talk about the olden days. Half the villagers weren't free to leave the village. They had to work on the lord's land two days a week. God be praised everyone's free nowadays.

**D**

My brother's worried his job. He copies out books for people to read and thinks this new printing machine will put men like him out of work.

**E**

I've done well and live far more comfortably than my father but with luck and hard work my sons will do even better.

The limitations of these individual activities made me realise that, to work effectively on sense of period, it is essential to ask where it fits into the whole process of 'doing history' and what it contributes to a history course at Key Stage 3. But that requires a clear idea how Key Stage 3 History works as a whole course, not just as a series of exciting individual enquiries and activities. We need to hear the music, not just the individual notes!

### What time does the tune start?

*'What sort of music are you going to make me listen to tonight?'*

*'Jazz.'*

*'Obviously. But what kind of jazz?'*

*'What kinds do you know about?'*

*'I know three kinds. Hot. Cool. And what time does the tune start?'*

[Alan Plater *The Beiderbecke Connection*, 1988]

I suspect 'what time does the tune start?' sums up the struggle many students have to make sense of Key Stage 3 History. They enjoy the notes - individual lessons and activities - but do these notes create a historical tune that they leave Key Stage 3 singing for themselves? This is not a new problem. I think it has existed as long as history has been taught, but we are only now beginning to ask fundamental questions about how to turn those notes into historical tunes that students can recognize and sing by the age of 14.<sup>6</sup>

To convert the notes into a tune students (and new teachers) may need a simple model showing how the main components

in Key Stage 3 History could inter-relate to create a course (see Figure 3). I am slightly nervous about this figure because historians often feel uncomfortable with models. We are always aware of exceptions, but I suspect new teachers may appreciate something like this to make sense of what they are doing and to communicate to their students how history works. And models are there to be debated and developed, rather than unthinkingly followed. I cannot say too loudly that this model is offered as a launch-pad, not a straitjacket.

### So, how does this model work?

#### 1. Enquiry.

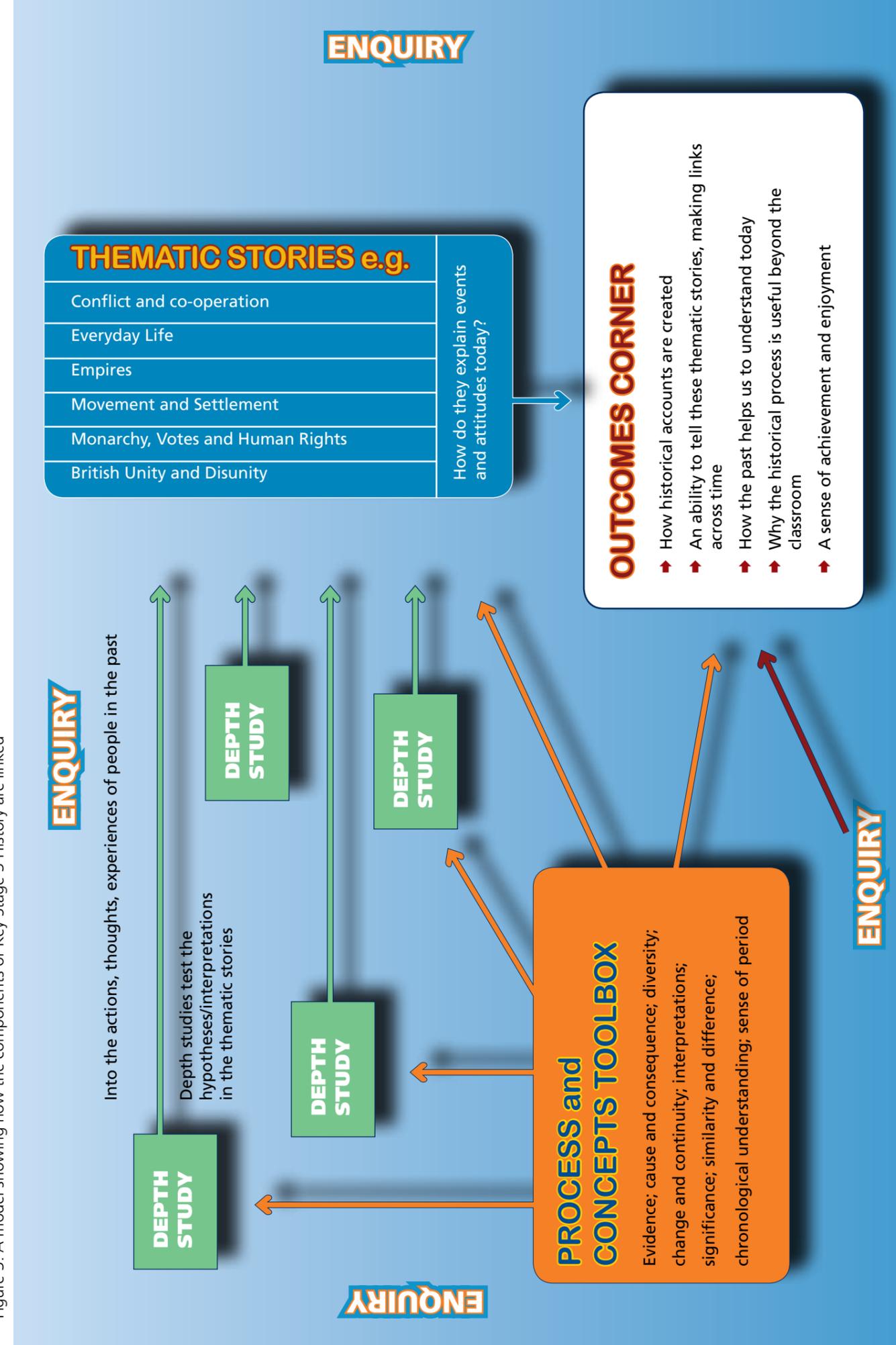
Enquiry runs through this model like Blackpool through a stick of rock because enquiry is the glue that holds everything together. Four points are critical:

a) Enquiry must be seen as a repeatable process, along the lines of 'question, hypothesis, testing, reformulation of hypothesis,' that students can explicitly explain and re-use with increasing confidence and independence across Key Stage 3.

b) Enquiry is at the heart of arguments about the value of studying history. It helps students, parents and school management see the important benefits of studying history; thinking and planning a way through a problem by research, asking questions, independent thinking and effective communication.<sup>7</sup>

c) Having a scheme of work full of enticing enquiry questions is not enough to develop students understanding

Figure 3: A model showing how the components of Key Stage 3 History are linked



of enquiry if all the posing of questions and structuring of enquiry is done by the teacher. An effective scheme must help students build the ability to ask their own questions and plan their own way through enquiries, simultaneously using and developing their understanding of historical enquiry.

c) Students often tackle enquiry through mysteries of the 'What happened to the Princes in the Tower?' type. These activities can be valuable as a means of identifying and clarifying the process of enquiry, but otherwise have limited value; one-off activities divorced from the rest of the course. Enquiry needs to be embedded into the warp and weft of Key Stage 3, by which

## What intrigues me is that I have never been taught to develop a sense of period. It seemingly happened while I wasn't looking.

I mean the relationship between two other core components – the thematic stories and the depth enquiries.<sup>8</sup>

### 2. Thematic stories.

These, the core of the content studied, provide two things:

a) they show students what 'doing history' produces; that the results of all these enquiries, of the myriad pieces of research undertaken by historians, are narrative accounts and explanations of developments over time.

b) To return to my musical metaphor, thematic stories are the tunes that students can sing on leaving Key Stage 3. They link all those bits of history across time and are the content take-aways that can give students a sense of achievement: 'this is what I know and can understand after doing history.'

Three other points about thematic stories are also important:

c) When I started thinking about thematic stories, I saw them as narratives that students built up across Key Stage 3. That now seems rather impractical because it means that students only see the completed stories at the end of their course. Students would make far more sense of these stories across time if they met them in complete, simplified form from the beginning of their course. Each story needs to be visible and tellable in one lesson and treated as a hypothesis, to be investigated and reformulated through the depth enquiries. Thematic stories are therefore intertwined with depth studies by the process of enquiry. And this should help students see that thematic stories are not unchallengeable constructs, but that they keep changing as more is discovered or different approaches to enquiry are taken.

d) Treating the thematic story as a hypothesis to be investigated and reformulated through depth studies places enquiry at the heart of all work in history. It helps students see how the four components in the model come together.

e) These thematic stories raise the question of what kind of knowledge we want students to take away from Key Stage 3? Is it an overall history of Britain, as was assumed for so long to be the objective, or is it an ability to tell several of these thematic stories individually? Perhaps this is a more realistic, more achievable goal?

### 3. Depth Enquiries.

Depth enquiries do not stand apart from thematic stories. We use them to test the validity of the interpretations in the thematic story or, as Rogers has described, to enhance students' understanding of the inter-connectedness and significance of events including links to the present.<sup>10</sup> Figure 4 shows a handful of question types that could be revised to fit individual localities or individuals. Some of these could be used across Key Stage 3 to test an outline story of 'standards of living.' The graph is one of my own devising, but does not claim to be utterly accurate. Total accuracy is not the point.

The purpose is to give students an outline to question and revise through their enquiries, which then becomes their own account, their own piece of history.

One result of this inter-relationship is to make us look hard at our enquiry questions and activities. To be puritanical, choosing a depth enquiry solely on the criterion of interest will not do, if it does not also test and reformulate the relevant thematic story. Figure 5 provides an example of this in the well-worked context of the Norman Conquest and the thematic story of 'conflict.' I suspect that the most common enquiry questions on 1066 are 'Who would you choose as king after Edward died?' and 'Why did William win at Hastings?,' but neither of these questions fit into this broader study of conflict which revolves around investigating 'Why have people risked their lives in warfare?' Within this broader context, neither of these smaller, familiar questions lead anywhere as what is learned is not going to be re-used later in work on conflict. However, asking 'Why did so many people risk their lives in war and rebellion between 1066 and the 1070s?' provides the means to test the initial outline story for one period and reformulate the story for that period. It could then provide a basis for helping students create their own questions around this theme and for comparisons with events today.<sup>11</sup> The argument could be raised that the enquiries are repetitive, but it is the very repetition of the enquiry, set in different periods, that enables students to grow in confidence. We want them to think, 'I know how to go about this kind of enquiry.' We want them to be able to compare across time periods: 'In the 1060s the motives were x and y; which of those motives also existed in the 1900s?'

### 4. Process and concepts.

These are the tools we use when undertaking enquiry: the use of sources as evidence, an understanding of causation, similarity and difference and, among others, 'sense of period.' Like the other concepts, 'sense of period' is important because it helps us answer questions. As an example, another classic topic is the execution of Charles I in 1649. To place this event in a long time-frame, we need to make connections between 1649 and what happened in 1215, 1327 and 1399; other occasions when kings were in conflict with elements of the ruling class, but which led to different outcomes. To

# Standard of Living in Britain

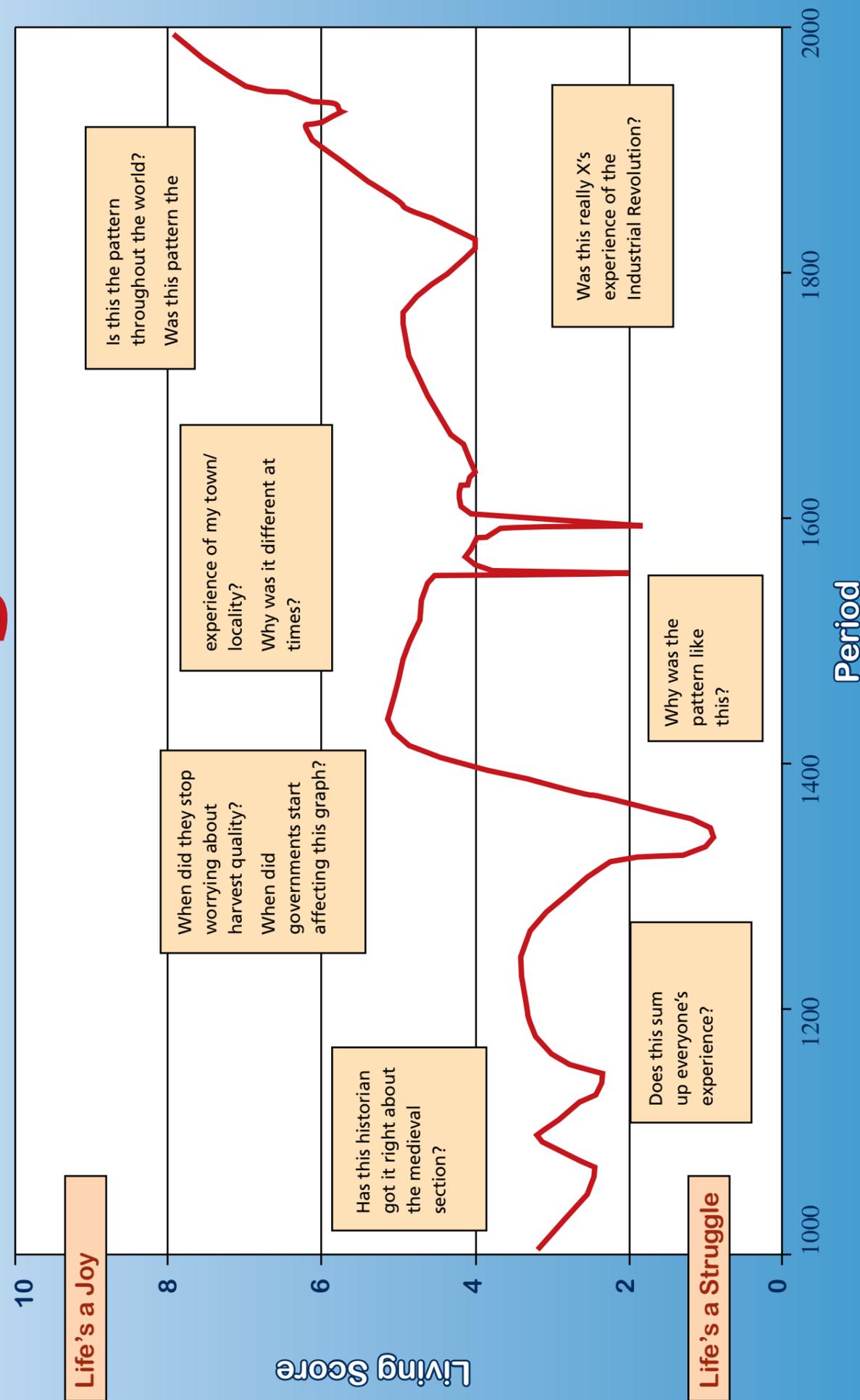


Figure 4: Some questions for testing the hypothesis in a thematic story

Figure 5: Embedding sense of period into enquiries about conflict

## Embedding sense of period into enquiries about conflict

### STAGE 1 Creation of thematic story about reasons for being involved in war

Students place cards on a timeline – which attitudes do they expect to have been held in each period?

The cards only offer some of the answers. The resulting pattern offers an initial answer to the question:

‘Why have people risked their lives in warfare?’

### STAGE 2 Depth Enquiry

Why did so many people risk their lives 1066-1071?

Then revisit Stage 1 hypothesis for 1066-1071

### STAGE 3 Outline

Review Stage 1 hypothesis for 1100-1900 using kinaesthetic activities – world map and Top Trumps cards

### STAGE 4 Depth Enquiry

Why have so many of our families risked their lives in wars since 1900s? Then revisit Stage 1 hypothesis for post 1900

### STAGE 5 How have attitudes to war and justifications for war changed over time?

Review thematic story:

- ◆ What similarities and differences can you see in reasons for people risking their lives?
- ◆ What does this tell you about the dominating ideas of periods x, y, z?
- ◆ How does this investigation help you understand events, actions and choices today?

ensure these connections are made we need to look hard at the enquiry question. ‘Why was Charles I put on trial and executed in 1649?’ does not necessarily identify what was particular about the ideas of the mid-seventeenth century because it does not pick out the fundamental difference between the 1640s and earlier periods: that Charles I was not replaced by another king.

However ‘Why was Charles I the first king to be executed and not replaced by another king?’ requires students to develop a ‘sense of period’ because they have to make comparisons. What was different in the ideas, attitudes and experiences of people in the 1640s from those in the 1200s and 1300s that explains why there had never been a republic before? We have become used to making concepts such as evidence or interpretations explicit so that students can ‘do history’ more effectively. We need to do the same for ‘sense of period,’ showing why it is an important part of the armoury of historians.

### Returning to ‘sense of period’

Finally, some observations and questions about ‘sense of period’ arising from the discussions above:

1. A basic question is ‘Which periods should students have a distinctive sense of by the age of 14?’ It is easy to identify the Middle Ages (though this term conveys no sense of the distinctiveness of the period) and the age of the Industrial Revolution but what about 1400-1750? Is this a single period, or two? And what do we call it? ‘Early modern,’ being devoid

of meaning, is useless and yet the National Curriculum expects students to use ‘vocabulary and conventions’ about periods. If pupils are to succeed in this then period names need to be examined and renamed by pupils themselves. What, for example, would you call this book about 1066-1400 or 1400-1750?

2. If the current Programme of Study encourages teachers to think about bigger pictures and longer time periods, and to explore change and continuity across those periods, then there is a need, perhaps once a year, to investigate a period. A ‘sense of period’ can be developed by asking more intriguing versions of ‘what was so special about living in ...?’ or ‘Was person X typical of ...?’ The ideal way in is through one or more individuals but make sure it stays comparative; what do you have in common with him or her? what would you find different? It is the balance of such comparisons that creates distinctive periods. Maybe there is a need for an end of Key Stage round-up, asking groups of students to debate issues from the perspective of different periods with each group from a different period?

3. Does ‘sense of period’ need to be more explicit at GCSE? It is critical in SHP Development Studies where understanding medicine in the Middle Ages, Renaissance or nineteenth century requires a sophisticated ‘sense of period’ to avoid stereotypical descriptions. In contrast we might expect ‘sense of period’ to develop in SHP Depth Studies but I suspect it does not because there is no comparative element. Students study issues within a period, but do not investigate what it is distinctive about the period. Equally, does ‘sense of period’ strongly emerge from modern history courses, even though the distinctive periods are much shorter?

4. Is ‘sense of period’ used at A-level to help students understand the events and people they study? What level of sophistication is appropriate for students studying, for example, the Tudor period? They must need a strong sense of comparison between say 1510 and 1600 to help them understand people and events more effectively.

5. All of which leads to asking how we might see progression in ‘sense of period’ from primary onwards?

### What makes you smile with your heart?

‘You’re my funny valentine

Sweet, comic valentine

You make me smile with my heart.’

[Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart,

My Funny Valentine, ideally sung by Ella Fitzgerald]

This article will not leave you thinking ‘I would love to try that out next week.’ Articles on long-term planning do not have that effect because they focus on the head, rather than the heart of history teaching. However, I will finish with the most important thing I have learned in the 30 years since I first had an article in *Teaching History*. No matter how good our planning, no matter how carefully thought-out our objectives, they matter not a jot if we do not communicate to students that history is our valentine, the subject that makes us smile with our hearts.

#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> See Stanford, M. (2008) ‘Redrawing the Renaissance: non-verbal assessment in Year 7,’ *Teaching History 130, Picturing History Edition*, for a discussion of assessing sense of period. There is much here worth reflecting on, but I wonder if how we teach sense of period is really ‘pretty obvious,’ as the author suggests.
- <sup>2</sup> Lively, P. (1985) *The Driftway* Puffin: London p.80
- <sup>3</sup> It seems strange that the 2008 Programme of Study places ‘beliefs, ideas and attitudes’ within a single theme rather than them being suffused throughout the areas of content.
- <sup>4</sup> For example, see Osowiecki, M. (2005) ‘Seeing, hearing and doing the Renaissance,’ *Teaching History 117 and 118, Dealing with Distance and Re-thinking Differentiation Editions* and also Riley, M. ((1997) ‘Big Stories and Big pictures; making outlines and overviews interesting’ *Teaching History, 88*.
- <sup>5</sup> See Dawson, I. and Wilson, M. (2008) *SHP History Year 7*, Hodder Education, pp.190-191.
- <sup>6</sup> This discussion continues the thoughts expressed in Dawson, I. (2008) ‘Thinking across time: planning and teaching the story of power and democracy at Key Stage 3,’ *Teaching History 130, Picturing History Edition*
- <sup>7</sup> It is difficult to overestimate the importance of making clear to students what they can gain from studying History. See Harris, R. and Haydn, T. (2008) ‘Children’s ideas about school history and why they matter,’ *Teaching History 132, Historians in the Classroom Edition* especially pages 44-45 for students’ difficulty in explaining why History is useful.
- <sup>8</sup> For further discussion of ‘enquiry,’ resources to help students identify the process of enquiry and resources linked to the activities on everyday life and conflict over time described below see [www.thinkinghistory.co.uk](http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk)
- <sup>9</sup> Central to a sense of achievement is the form in which students record their ‘tunes’. For the uses of road maps and MovieMaker, emphasising the power of non-written communications for helping students develop and demonstrate their complex understanding see Foster, R. (2008) ‘Speed cameras, dead ends, drivers and diversions: year 9 use a ‘road map’ to problematise change and continuity,’ *Teaching History 131, Assessing Differently Edition* and Burnham, S. (2008) ‘Making pupils want to explain: using Movie Maker to foster thoroughness and self-monitoring,’ *Teaching History 133, Simulating History Edition*.
- <sup>10</sup> Rogers, R. (2008) ‘Raising the bar: developing meaningful historical consciousness at Key Stage 3,’ *Teaching History 133, Simulating History Edition*. This is an important and very helpful article for anyone thinking about course construction, students’ preconceptions and their impact on learning and helping students establish links between past and present.
- <sup>11</sup> For ideas on the vital skill of asking questions see Burnham, S. (2007) ‘Getting Year 7 to set their own questions about the Islamic Empire,’ *Teaching History 128, Beyond the Exam Edition*.

## Half page advert