

Developing Students' Chronological Knowledge and Understanding

A Final Exploration

'What is time? I confess I am still ignorant. Who can easily and briefly explain it? Who can even comprehend it in thought or put the answer into words? Yet we refer to nothing more familiarly or more knowingly.'

St Augustine of Hippo, Confessions XI, quoted in Matthew Kempshall, 'Space, time and the world' in Isabella Lazzarini, *The Later Middle Ages* (Short Oxford History of Europe), 2021.

I've talked and written about chronology many times, from workshops at the first SHP conference in 1989 onwards, but I've never felt I've got to the bottom of the issues – probably the only thing I have in common with St Augustine of Hippo. One reason is that chronology, whilst pivotal in studying history, has always been in the chorus but never the star of specifications, courses and books, probably because it's never been a major focus of assessment. And each time I felt close to getting to grips with chronology another project appeared with an urgent deadline – working with Dale Banham on the 2008 NC we made good progress on our ideas about chronology but then came GCSE changes and we had to switch our minds to those. Above all, in this catalogue of excuses, developing chronological knowledge and understanding is really tricky, far more complex and multi-layered than I realised back at that conference in 1989.

This is my final, final go at writing about chronology, prompted by an invitation from Matt Stanford to talk at the 2022 SHP conference for Early Careers Teachers. It took me a while to agree to do the session – I'm 70 and well adrift from classroom experience – but the chance to wrestle with the issues one more time was too intriguing to resist. This article sets out these latest thoughts but is still exploratory, about ideas and possibilities, definitely NOT certainties – but hopefully some of the ideas will help departments with planning and teaching, maybe even moving chronology out of the chorus and into centre stage, up there in the full glare of the footlights!

The article is divided into three sections (the third by far the longest):

1. Defining chronological knowledge and understanding
2. Identifying the ‘takeaways’ about chronology to be aimed for by the end of KS3.
3. Planning and teaching how to students to understand those takeaways

But first two very important introductory thoughts:

Important intro thought 1:

It's not easy!

This is intended to be reassuring though it's also a warning. Developing students' chronological knowledge and understanding is not easy. There are several reasons for this:

Chronological knowledge and understanding involve a lot more than just ‘knowing’ events in chronological order – there are multiple elements, each of which need to be taught to and understood.

It's difficult to teach because it's hard to see it happening, partly because of the multiplicity of elements, partly because it builds very gradually –think about how slowly your own sense of duration has developed, for example.

To be successful we need to understand students' perceptions of the role of chronology in ‘doing history’. Do they see it as simply being about learning dates? Do they understand how better chronological knowledge and understanding helps them improve their work in history, whether at KS3, GCSE or A level?

As a result, a department developing a plan for improving students' chronological knowledge and understanding must, for your own sanity, see the process as a long-term project, not a quick fix – least of all amidst Covid exhaustion which won't go away at all quickly. So don't rush and don't be disappointed if it takes longer than you first thought.

Important intro thought 2:

What's in students' minds about chronological knowledge and understanding?

Picking up one of the points from Intro Thought 1 – the following sentence is the most important in the whole article:

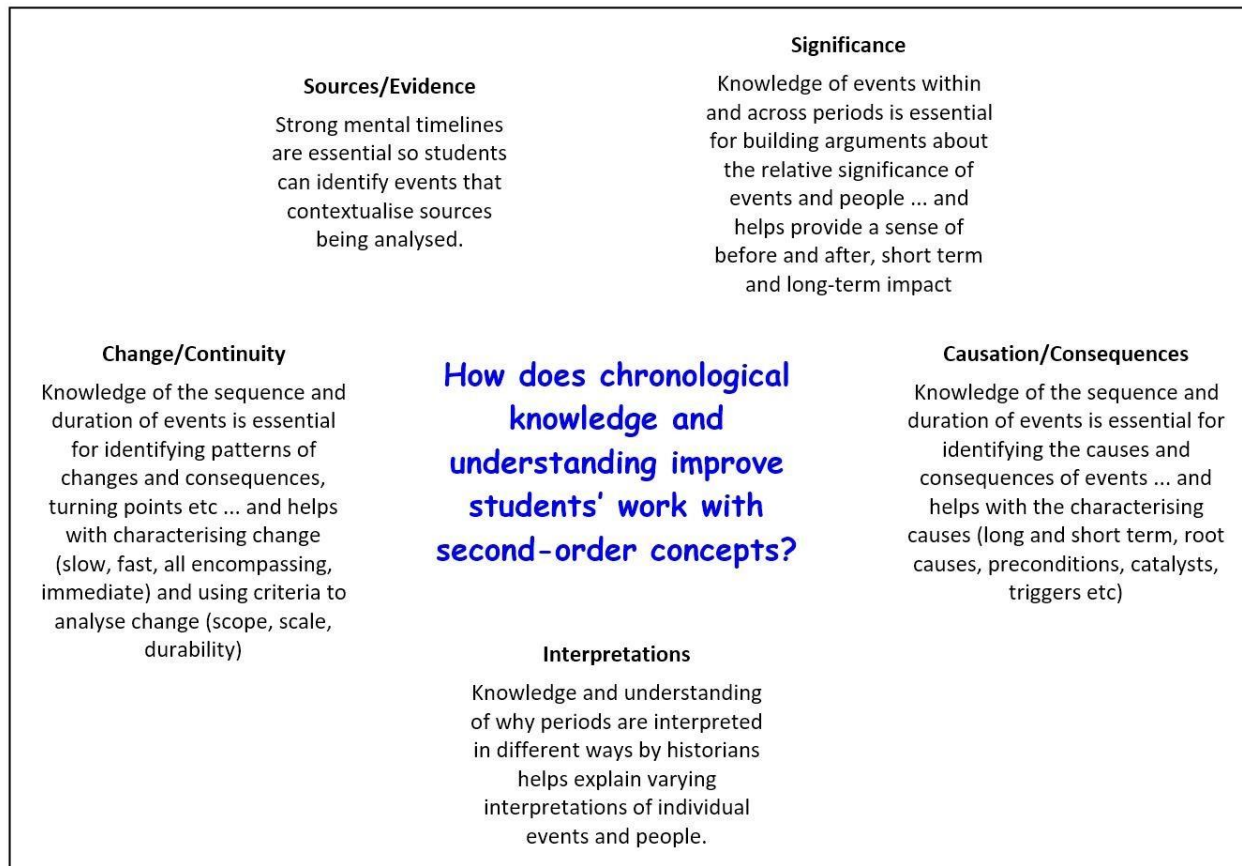
It's not enough to focus on our planning and teaching – we also need to find out what sense students make of chronology and why they think (or don't) it's important.

This is something I didn't pay enough attention to for years but it's absolutely central to working out how to help students improve their chronological knowledge and understanding. I suspect there's two related issues to explore:

- a) Do students (of whatever age) see developing their chronological knowledge and understanding as a central objective, comparable to learning how to use sources or analyse interpretations? If not, is there much likelihood of them making significant progress in developing their chronological knowledge and understanding?
- b) Do they understand how chronological knowledge and understanding help them 'do' history better or do they think it's just about knowing dates in isolation? If it's the latter (which seems very likely) how does this hinder their chances of improving their work in history?

In thinking about these questions it may be helpful to map how chronology intersects with other aspects of studying history and so can strengthen students' work.

The diagram (overleaf) is no more than a first stab at such a map but may help a department's thinking.



Chronology is no different from any other aspects of history, whether it's concepts such as evidence and causation or the topics and periods they study – we have to identify students' preconceptions and misconceptions, then build them into planning and teaching in order to improve students' work.

If we don't know how students make sense of chronology then it's much harder to help them make progress. **This is as relevant at A level as it is with younger students.**

Section 1: Defining chronological knowledge and understanding

Effective planning and teaching obviously depend upon a department establishing a common understanding of this thing called chronology. This section offers a definition of chronological knowledge and understanding that could be used as stimulus for your own discussions.

I've used both words 'knowledge' and 'understanding' – there's nothing deeply theoretical behind this language but I find the distinction helpful in a rough and ready way. In my mind 'knowledge' is, broadly, information and 'understanding' is more conceptual – and this helped me break down the points below more clearly.

a) Knowledge

This is the predictable section, identifying the elements that make up a mental timeline:

- a) Knowledge of the chronological order of broad periods of history
- b) Broad characterisations of particular periods (how they are interpreted) e.g. balance of change and continuity, pace of change
- c) Understanding of themes across time – population, monarchy and power, empires, standards of living etc – and how they developed within and across historical periods
- d) Knowledge of particular events and dates

This list is similar to that in Ofsted's Research Review (2021) though in a sequence I find more logical. However I've one important thought to add and that's to ask "whose timeline and historical periods are we talking about?"

When 'mental timelines' are mentioned there's generally an assumption that the focus is on western Europe – but people in other places and civilisations have other mental timelines. Systems of dating clearly differ and the familiar periodisation of Middle Ages, Early Modern etc doesn't apply universally. Periods and events such as prehistory and Industrial Revolution happened at different times in different places. We need to consider whether this is something that students need to be aware of and understand – and whether they should be developing or aware of mental timelines for other places and civilisations as part of diversifying the curriculum.

b) Understanding: the nature of chronological conventions and how chronology helps students ‘do history’ better

This segment, I suspect, contains ideas which are less often taught and may sound daunting – but I think they need discussion by departments, even if you decide to cover some elements at GCSE or A level rather than at KS3. However there is a lot to be said for introducing these ideas at KS3.

Points (1) to (4) set out a more explicit conceptual understanding of chronology and also its importance for studying history effectively:

1. Dates are essential in helping us understand and study the past effectively. They enable us to identify the sequence of events and understand duration – the real amount of time involved in a sequence of events – which is centrally important to explanation.
2. Having a mental timeline of whichever period we are studying helps us see how individual events and issues within the period are linked and relate to each other. It's also vital for confidence when studying.
3. Periods are constructs created by historians. This explains why historians give different names and dates to periods and why interpretations of periods often vary. Our standard periodisation is not some kind of 11th Commandment!

(I think this point is particularly important because I believe a key aim in teaching history is helping students become comfortable with history being full of uncertainties and varying interpretations.)

4. A miscellany of students' misconceptions and annual irritations:
 - i) 1348 is in the 14thC century. Can students explain why?
 - ii) Overlaps of periods – they're not always sequential e.g. Saxon, Viking, Norman England

Section 2: Developing 'Takeaways' about chronological knowledge and understanding

Once agreed on a definition of chronology, the next step is to identify the knowledge and understandings you want students to 'take-away' from KS3 so they can be used again later. If you aren't familiar with the idea of Takeaways there's an article here that explains what I mean – I've been using this idea since the early 2000s and have found it hugely helpful in planning.

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/Takeaways.html>

So what might a list of KS3 takeaways about chronology look like? The list below is a starter, a basis for defining your own takeaways more closely. Some of the takeaways are too general but I can't define in detail what you will be aiming for in your school.

By the end of KS3 students will:

- a) have developed mental timelines of the histories they have studied
- b) be able to identify key periods in western Europe but are aware that other places and civilisations identify other periods that relate to their own histories
- c) understand that historical periods are invented and debated by historians e.g. about how to name, date and interpret periods
- d) be able to identify the key features and events of individual periods (e.g. patterns of changes and continuities)
- e) be able to explain the overall patterns and key events in major thematic stories across time e.g. population, monarchy and power
- f) understand why dates and chronological understanding are an important help in studying history
- g) understand why centuries have 'the wrong number' i.e. 1300s = 14th century

Whatever you choose, your takeaways need to be made explicit and discussed with students by, for example, asking them to decide which takeaways are the most important to remember – and why.

Takeaways also need to be identified for GCSE and A level classes too – and discussed with them – building on the groundwork done at KS3 and earlier.

While some of the above may be difficult and time-consuming to teach, the implications of not doing so seem profound because students' continued misunderstandings of the nature and value of chronology may undercut the work they are doing. This applies just as much to GCSE and A level as to KS3 and earlier.

Section 3: Planning and teaching for chronological knowledge and understanding

This section discusses planning and teaching ideas for improving students' chronological knowledge and understanding. Inevitably these ideas are heavily influenced by the issues I see as important for effective teaching at all levels up to and including undergraduate teaching – building from students' preconceptions, making learning visible i.e. ensuring students understand how activities help to improve their learning and, thirdly, making learning memorable and therefore effective by deploying visual and physical activities when they are helpful.

This section is structured as follows:

- a) Helping students understand why chronological knowledge helps them study history more effectively
- b) Establishing and developing the idea of mental timelines
- c) Developing a balance of enquiries to boost student's command of mental timelines
- d) Planning and Teaching about individual periods of history
- e) Teaching thematic enquiries across time – 4 examples

a) Helping students understand why chronological knowledge and understanding helps them study history more effectively

Why are dates important in history? The chances are that students don't have an answer. They may well see dates as imposed on them so they can be regurgitated in written work but don't see how dates help them study the past effectively. This must be de-motivating – and demoralising for anyone whose brain doesn't easily engage with numbers and dates. If I'm right, then we need to help students see why dates do help them understand the past, improve their work and get better grades. So for example ...

Give students a set of paragraphs on individual cards which describe the events of September and October 1066 – but without any dates on them or reference to the length of the battle of Hastings. Their task is to explain why William won at Hastings. When they've had a go at this give them a historian's or your own account that does include dates – what advantage have those dates given the author?

Clearly dates allow a historian to put the events in the right order – or confirm the order if students have found a logic in the pattern of the battles of Fulford, Stamford Bridge and Hastings. Secondly, dates enable students to think about the duration of the intervals between events – how quickly did Harold respond to news from the north, how quickly did he march south, did that march undermine his chances of success against William. They also gain a sense of how close the battle of Hastings was once they know how long it lasted.

So how have the dates and times helped them explain the events of autumn 1066 more effectively? That's what they need to discuss explicitly and take forward into future lessons – dates are essential for understanding the past.

You'll think of other opportunities to reinforce these ideas, including at A level. Remember to focus on both sequence and duration. The latter is really important, for example, in helping students understand the reluctance to execute Charles I – if they don't have a sense of the duration of the Civil War how can they understand that? One helpful method is to link the length of the Civil War to students' own lives – if you were 11 when the war started how old were you when it ended? How does that help you understand attitudes to the execution of the king?

See <https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/DurationTimelines.html#charles>

Another example of physically demonstrating the importance of sequence and duration is the creation of a timeline for Henry VIII's wives – though the real focus isn't the wives but the pattern of the reign i.e. a long period of conservatism and continuity followed by major religious changes two-thirds into the reign. This is an activity I've often done with teachers and the 'wow, I've never seen it that way' reaction has been extremely common because of the simple visibility and clarity of the physical timeline. If teachers can learn from it then it's an essential activity with A level students and others!

See <https://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/DurationTimelines.html#henry>

Activities such as these, which make the importance of chronology visible and explicable, are essential if students are to realise that chronological knowledge and understanding is as important as work on sources or causation or any other concept. Without such activities chronology will continue to lurk unexplained and undervalued in the background.

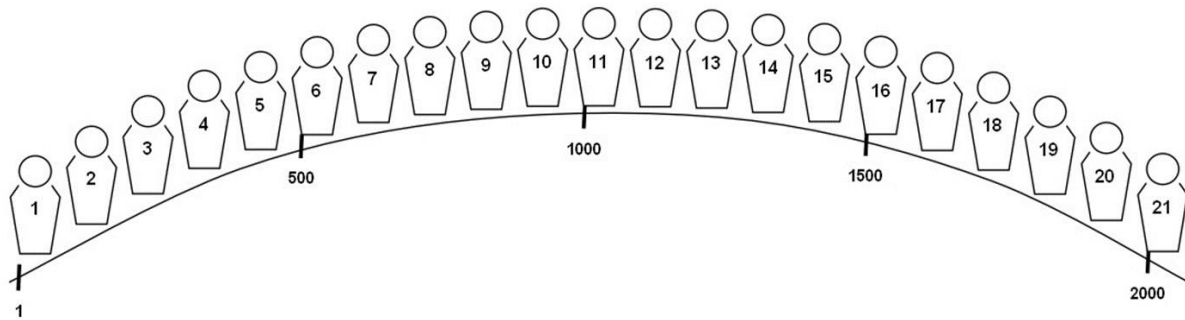
b) Establishing the idea of mental timelines

Few things undermine students' confidence more than feeling they don't quite understand what happened when and how events fitted together. Therefore students need to be aware of how building their own mental timelines will help them. So how can we introduce or reinforce the idea of mental timelines – whether at KS3, GCSE and A level?

The illustrations (below and overleaf) show two representations of mental timelines of British history. The first is from a textbook, the second is a physical timeline with students playing the parts of the centuries (each student wears a tabard with their century number). There are huge benefits for students of all ages of taking part in such an activity – they learn and remember more! Some teachers may worry that this activity is not serious or 'proper' enough at KS3 or A level but what's important is whether the learning is effective. Teachers need to adapt their teaching to help students rather than students having to fit in with a teacher's preferred style of teaching. Physical and visual activities help everyone because of their clarity and because they make what can be very conceptual much more concrete.



Timeline A: 1st - 20th Centuries



Timeline B: 1st – 21st Centuries

So what can you do with these timelines to help students develop their mental timeline? In brief:

- find out whether students can identify historical periods on the timeline
- discuss the relative duration of periods (this stands out with students in coloured-coded tabards – red for Romans, beige for Saxons etc)
- demonstrate overlaps e.g. of Saxons, Vikings and Normans which students often see as sequential
- identify different ways of naming periods (dynasties, events, conquerors etc)
- explore dating systems of other societies and civilisations
- discuss how they think about a period e.g. what adjectives would they use to describe a period?

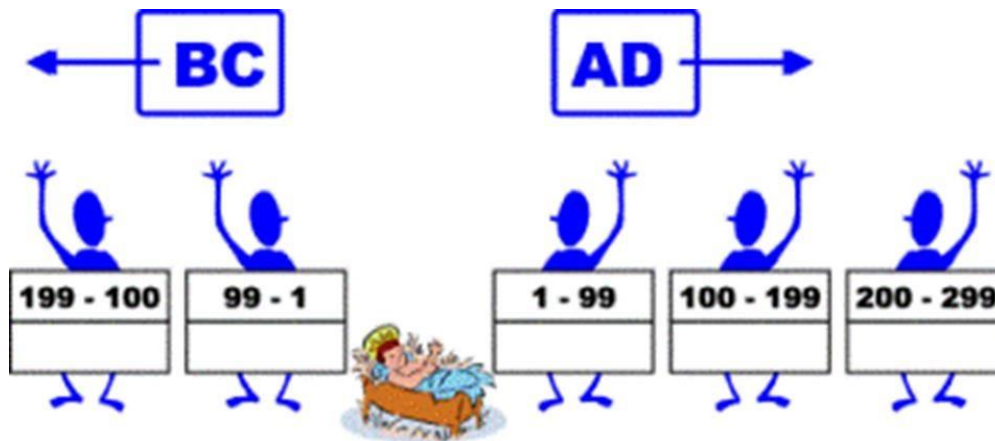
For more explanation of how to do all this see:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/BigHumanTimeline.html>

Another effective approach to mental timelines, developed by Catherine McCrory can be seen at:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/WineGums.html>

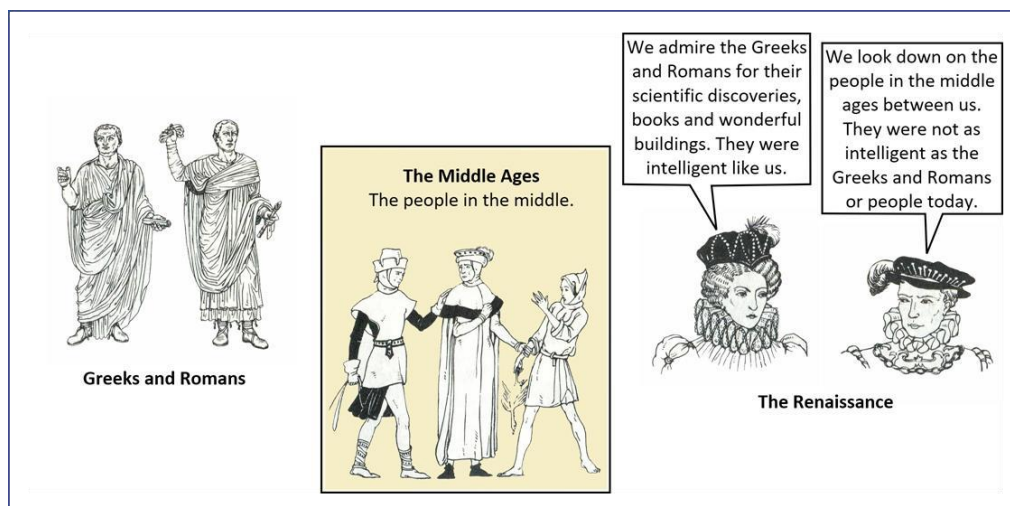
The value of visual, physical human timelines is also central to helping students who don't know whether 1348 was in the 13th or 14th century. If they can't understand AND explain why 1348 was the 14th century they may still be getting this wrong at GCSE and lose lots of marks in exams.



As the diagram above shows, building a timeline around a figure representing Christ shows very clearly the discrepancy between dates and centuries. For a full explanation see:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/MakingSenseofBCAD.html>

Away from timelines, another important issue to discuss is why periods have the names they have. Some make no sense to students and this undermines their ability to build their mental timeline – so we need to explain why periods are given particular names. For example, what are the Middle Ages in the middle of? Why is the 16th century known as the Tudor period when no-one called the royal family the Tudors in the 16thC? And definitely get really cross at the historians who came up with such a fatuous and pointless name for a period as Early Modern. Students will enjoy and remember you being cross! (there'll be more on tackling periods later in this article).



For resources see:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/WhenWereMiddleAges.html>

Mental timelines are just as important for GCSE and A level students as at KS3, even if the lengths of their timelines are different. Again it's important to find out whether GCSE and A level students see mental timelines as helping them study more effectively and then to help them build up their mental timelines for each course unit – this needs to be an explicit teaching objective, not something that's assumed they'll develop as the course develops. For advice on this see:

GCSE themes

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/attainment/AttainmentThemes.html#picture>

GCSE and A level Depth

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Issues/attainment/AttainmentDepth8.html>

An activity I've found very useful with A level and undergraduates studying a period of a around a century is the "Whose lifetime?" activity – in which groups of students research their lifetime within a period – what were the events that affected their lives, what do they most remember looking back etc etc. Comparing who had the most difficult or easiest lifespan gives everyone a sense of the whole.

See <https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/ComparativeLifetimes.html>

c) Developing a balance of enquiries to boost students' command of a mental timeline

This section is about planning a K3 scheme of work to create a greater chance of improving chronological knowledge and understanding. KS3 History is often built around depth enquiries. Depth is good for developing understanding of evidence, causation etc but the absence of overview enquiries reduces the chances of students building mental timelines of periods and improving chronological knowledge and understanding. Therefore we need to re-think the balance of enquiries – which also (as my work on teaching about the Middle Ages indicates) helps students develop a more balanced and accurate understanding of the period.

To achieve a balanced view of any period we need three types of enquiries:

1. Enquiries which help students see people as fellow human beings e.g. What mattered to people of the time?
2. Overview enquiries which help students see patterns of change and continuity and build up their mental timelines. These enquiries are of two distinct types:
 - (i) Big story enquiries about an individual period
 - (ii) Thematic enquiries within or across periods e.g. royal power
3. Depth enquiries into actions, events, motives

If the overview enquiries in item 2 are to play a greater role in KS3 schemes of work it's important to identify what they contribute to students' historical understanding. Reasons include:

- They identify long-term developments we can't see in Depth Studies.
- We can see connections between events far apart in time and which events were turning points leading to important changes.
- They play a key part in building mental timelines and give students practice in moving between different time-frames – and provide practice and understandings students need for GCSE Themes

Section (d) below discusses ways of teaching Big Story enquiries on individual historical periods and section (e) discusses teaching thematic enquiries.

d) Planning and Teaching enquiries about individual periods of history

Historical periods are the foundations of our mental timelines. Knowing the sequence of periods, how they overlap, their relative durations and key features set the groundwork on which we build a more detailed layer of knowledge featuring individual events and people. Therefore it's important for historical periods to be an explicit, concrete presence in schemes of work rather than an ephemeral presence in the background.

How do we plan schemes of work to give periods a greater presence and, at the same time, helps students see that periods are constructs, interpretations created by historians for organisational purposes? One approach is to build over-arching enquiries about individual periods into your

scheme of work – enquiries which also give coherence to the work students do on a period of history

Some examples of enquiries examining broad characterisations of periods:

- 'Nasty, stupid and stagnant.' Is this a fair summary of people and their lives in the Middle Ages?
- 'Are people right to be so negative about the Middle Ages?'
- Was the Early Modern period really so different from the Middle Ages?
- 1750-1900: Is the Industrial Revolution a fair name for this period?
- Has the world been war-mad since 1900?

Such questions:

- i) create coherence, pulling together the work students do on a period of history
- ii) bring periods to the foreground, an important element in building mental timelines
- iii) challenge stereotypes of and generalisations about periods
- iv) identify and challenge students' preconceptions about periods
- v) lead into discussing why different interpretations of periods develop
- vi) help students see periods as constructs

Without such overview enquiries about individual periods it's hard to see how these outcomes can be achieved. For more see

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalArticles/Periodisation.html>

Now for the practicalities of teaching about a period as a whole rather than only teaching about the events and people within it. There are four stages to this teaching sequence:

Stage 1. identify students' preconceptions and 'off the top of the head' answers to the period enquiry question. It's essential that students identify their initial ideas so they are focussed on the question and can track their developing ideas as they work on the period. For an example see <https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalBase/Section1.html>

Stage 2. begin to explore the question through a Big Story overview of the period that lasts several lessons at most. At the end of this, students rethink their answers to the period enquiry question. I explore ways of teaching such Big Story overviews below.

Stage 3. use your chosen enquiries about individual people, themes and events within the period but link this material to the period enquiry question, asking students how their answer has developed. You can find examples in the chapters here:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalBase/Section2.html>

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalBase/Section3.html>

Stage 4. conclusion – ask students how/why their answers to the period enquiry question have developed.

Returning to teaching the Big Story overview (stage (2) above) – in the resources I’ve developed on the Middle Ages I’ve provided two approaches to this. One is a textbook chapter, the other is a scripted drama, both cover the same material and ideas. They can be found in full at:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/MedievalBase/Section4.html>

To introduce these resources, the opening pages of the textbook chapter are shown overleaf. The core activity asks students to decide which colour/s represent each century depending on what they see as its key features – this helps students unpick the generalisation that the Middle Ages was a time of continuity and stagnation. You start with brown (life was hard and difficult) and grey (continuity dominated) as these are common preconceptions of the period – and then seek evidence for other colours in the text that follows.

Medieval Lives by Ian Dawson

4: Telling Your Big Story of Medieval Britain

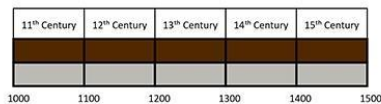


Using colours to tell your Big Story

Many people think that life in the Middle Ages was always hard and difficult and never changed – life must have been awful. That's why the timeline (below) uses two very dull colours to tell the story of the Middle Ages.

Grey is for continuity – because many people think that life stayed the same throughout the Middle Ages. There were never any changes.

Muddy brown is for life always being hard and difficult.



However this dull and boring story of the Middle Ages is wrong – and you are going to find out why. You are going to be the person in the microlight aircraft, able to see the whole of the Middle Ages spread out below you. You'll discover a far more interesting and accurate story – and use more colours to make the story clearer.

What do you already know that challenges the two ideas about the Middle Ages listed above?

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I'm Ian Dawson.

I wrote this chapter and other books about the Middle Ages. I don't think the story in this timeline is accurate.

Your challenge is to write a more accurate story!

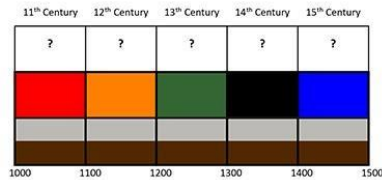
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Medieval Lives by Ian Dawson

4: Telling Your Big Story of Medieval Britain

Choosing your colours for your Big Story of the Middle Ages

We are going to use more colours to tell a more accurate story of the Middle Ages and make the story clearer. The new timeline below still uses grey and brown but there is also room for two more colours in each century. I have filled one of the new colours in, using the Colour Code below. Your tasks include choosing the fourth colour that goes in the empty box at the top of the timeline for each century.



What do the new colours tell you about each century?

Can you think of any events or reasons that explain the new colours?

Colour Code: What do the colours mean?

BROWN	Hard and Difficult	GREEN	Faster Changes
GREY	Unchanging, Continuous	BLUE	Opportunities and Optimism
RED	Danger	BLACK	Disaster and Despair
AMBER	Slow Changes		

Why are brown and grey still in the timeline?

Brown and grey do tell us important things about life throughout the Middle Ages. The brown line tells us that many people did work extremely hard, digging and ploughing the fields or carrying water from the well or river and firewood for cooking. Another hardship was sickness. One in every five children died before their first birthday and there were no effective anaesthetics to dull pain.

The grey line shows that there were continuities. Over 80% of people worked in farming throughout the Middle Ages and they depended on the food grown in their own fields for having enough to eat. If harvests were poor then people went short of food and even starved. Religion stayed important because people wanted to avoid going to Hell after they died.

Your tasks

1. Read the story of Eleventh Century on page 3. What evidence supports using red in the timeline?
2. Now choose one more colour which helps you to describe the Eleventh Century. Add that colour to the empty box, above the red box on the timeline. Then explain why you have chosen that colour.
3. Now repeat Tasks 1 and 2 for each of the other centuries, using the information on pages 4 to 7.

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Alternatively (or in addition – it works well as an intro to the text chapter) there's the scripted drama 'Journey to the Middle Ages'. I've had really positive feedback on how memorable students found the details in the script. To give you a flavour here's the final section. Professor Botchit (probably played by the teacher) is the tour guide taking the time-travellers to visit each century in turn but who keeps repeating common misconceptions about the period – and is then corrected by the medieval people they meet or by the passengers – it's a simple way of getting misconceptions out into the open and challenging them.

Act 7 Home again!

Professor Botchit: I hope you enjoyed your visit to the Middle Ages. It's a pity every century was much the same and all people did was fight each other.

First rich passenger: There were a lot more changes than I expected.

Second rich passenger: It looked very different by the time we reached the 1400s. All those towns and buildings changed how the landscape looked.

Third rich passenger: Even the castles had become really comfortable.

Intelligent Passenger 1: And it wasn't all wars.

Intelligent Passenger 2: Most people got on with farming and looking after their families.

Intelligent Passenger 3: They didn't want civil wars at all. They tried hard to stop them.

Ruth: I tried to say this at the beginning but Professor Botchit interrupted me very rudely. I read an article by Professor Butler and she said that people are wrong to think the Middle Ages was far more violent than today. It was violent but the evidence doesn't say it was more violent.

Intelligent passenger 1: Just think of the world wars, the Holocaust and terrorism in the 20th century.

Kate: They seemed like us in lots of ways. I bet they liked jokes and sitting in the sun.

Intelligent Passenger 2: I think people like looking down on the Middle Ages. It makes them feel cleverer and superior.

Matthew: I think they were clever and inventive and very good at organising all kinds of things – things I wouldn't know how to do.

Professor Botchit: We're home, everybody! 5 – 4- 3 – 2 – 1 – we're in the 21st century.

Intelligent passenger 3: I wonder what the rest of the world was like back then?

e) Thematic enquiries across time – 4 teaching examples

There are good reasons for increasing the use of thematic enquiries within or across periods. They:

- identify long-term developments and changes and continuities we can't see in Depth Studies.

- help students see connections between events far apart in time and also turning points leading to important changes.
- briefly cover topics we can't tackle in depth and might otherwise be omitted

In terms of chronological knowledge and understanding they provide regular reinforcement of students' developing mental timelines by requiring students to:

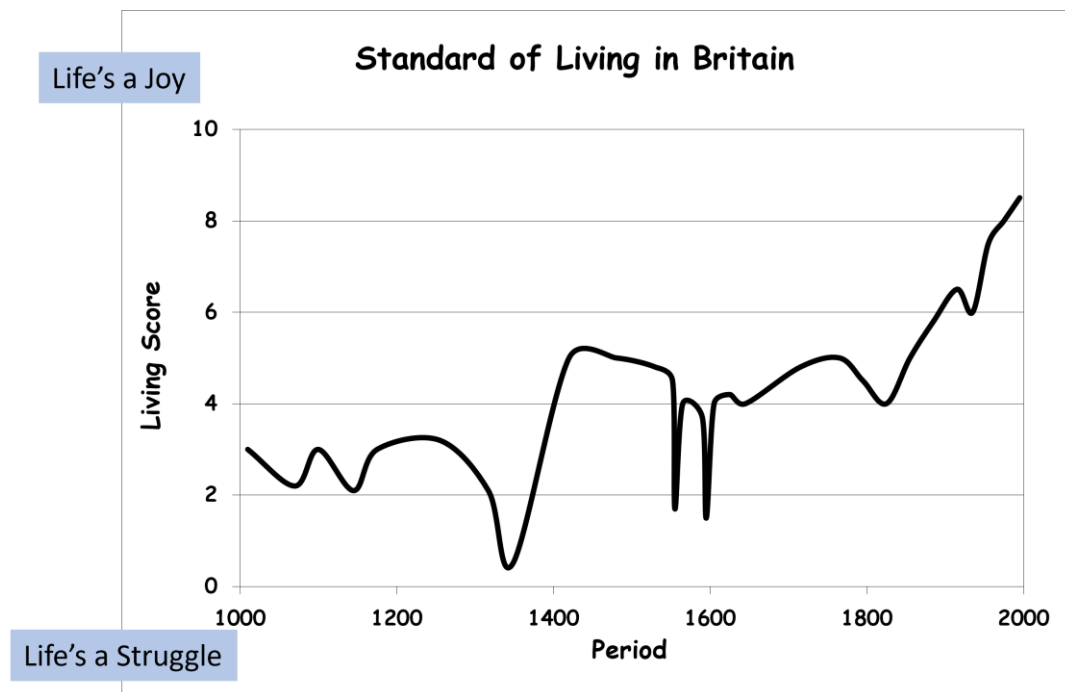
- keep those mental timelines in view and use them at the hearts of these enquiries
- make frequent accurate references to the names of periods and other terminology

Thematic enquiries can be taught across several historical periods and some major themes (e.g. standards of living, monarchy and power) will also be taught within individual historical periods but even when taught within periods it's vital that students

- See the pattern of the whole theme across time in one lesson, one page or slide
- Are aware that it's a simplification/generalisation
- Have the chance to tell the story of the theme themselves to consolidate their knowledge and understanding e.g. identify turning points, patterns of changes and continuities, ask questions about patterns
- Have the chance to revisit themes more than once across KS3

The rest of this section shows how four thematic enquiries can be presented visually and physically to students. This isn't to undervalue the role of text – in every case I'd have a text explanation accompanying the visual pattern but there are huge advantages in creating visual and physical representations of themes to help students see the overview.

These examples also illustrate the issue of generalisations – something that can worry teachers who aren't used to teaching about long spans of time. However we shouldn't hide the generalisations but use this opportunity to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of generalisations and prompt students to challenge them – see examples overleaf.

Example 1: Standards of Living in Britain c1000 to today

This graph is a core resource for studying standards of living, both as an overview of 1000 years and/or within individual periods. The graph is clearly a generalisation (e.g. there'd be far more variations because of harvest variations if I was trying to be detailed) but as a generalisation it creates opportunities for enquiries. Here are three possible stages in using this graph:

- before they see it – ask students to suggest what such a graph might look like over time, then give them this graph and ask them to describe the pattern, using language about change and continuity, about names of periods etc.
- How does the graph differ from expectations? Explore what surprises students e.g. that it's not a simple graph of continuing progress by comparing the graph in the 15thC and 18th and early 19th centuries (research shows, for example, that farming in some areas at least was more productive in the later middle ages than at any time until the late 18thC and that living standards rose by at least 50% for many in the 15thC).
- what enquiry question do students want to explore (perhaps different questions for groups?)? Some rough suggestions:
 - did everyone experience the same changes/continuities? Was it like this in our locality?
 - why did these changes happen?

- has this historian got the graph right for period x?
- when did they stop worrying about harvest quality? When did governments have a major impact?
- was this the pattern throughout the world?

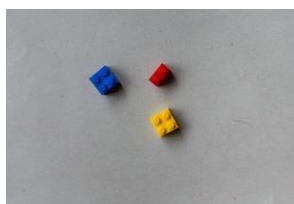
A graph like this can be revisited several times across KS3 – it needs augmenting with a written description but for many students its strength is its visual simplicity which can then be made more complex as work continues. For resources see:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/BigStoryEverydayLife.html>

Example 2: Changes in population c1000 to today



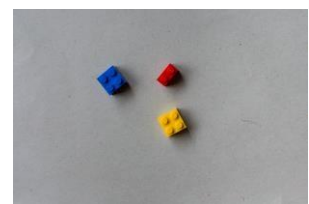
Year: 1100



Year: 1300



Year: 1400



Year: 1700



Year: 1800



Year: 1900



Year: 2000

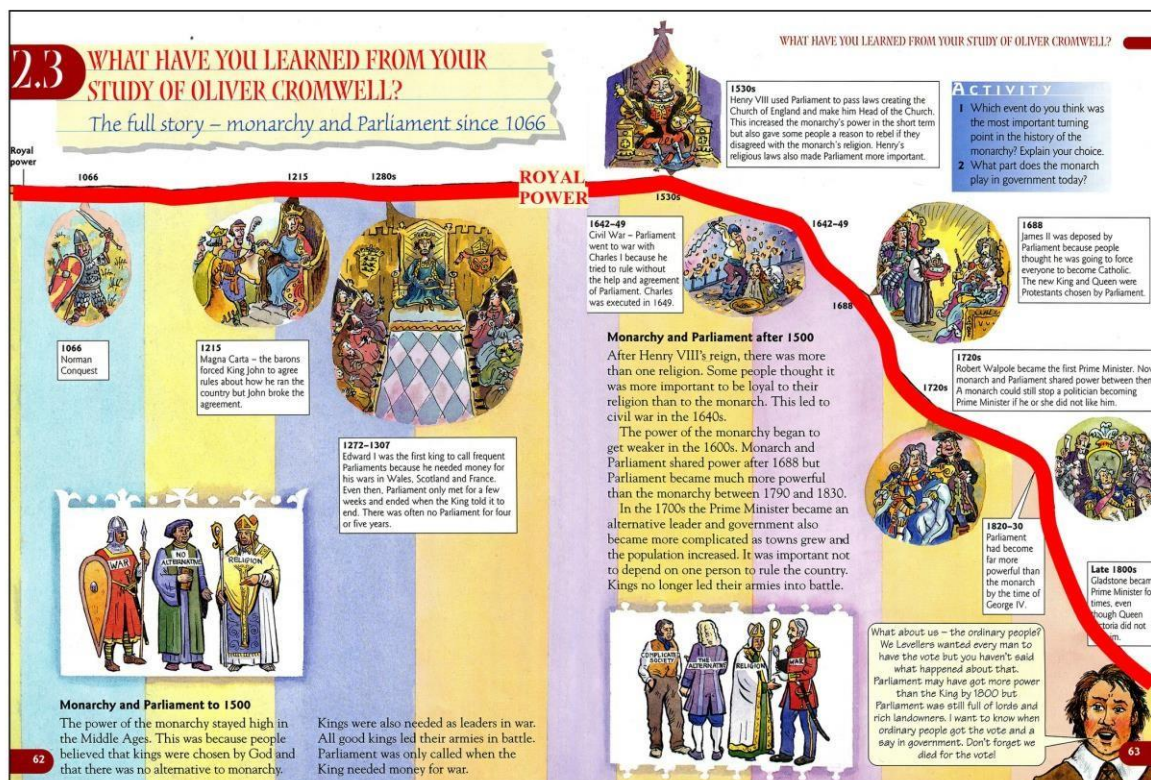
This overview can be created using lego as shown in the pictures above or by using students instead of the lego pieces. One student (or lego piece) equals 2 million people and the aim is to show the changing pattern of population in Britain quickly – speedy growth and then a rapid fall in the Middle Ages, very slow growth in the Early Modern period, tumultuous from the late 1700s.

You could follow the pattern of activity described above for standards of living but the most significant enquiry will be about consequences of population change – perhaps also done quickly via a card-sort. Which cards would you pick as consequences of population growth in the 12thC or the 19thC, for example – are the same cards appearing each time there's growth? This is very much a quick topic that could be used right at the beginning of Y7 as part of introducing the idea of a mental timelines but also revisited at intervals later in KS3.

For resources see <https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/Population.html>

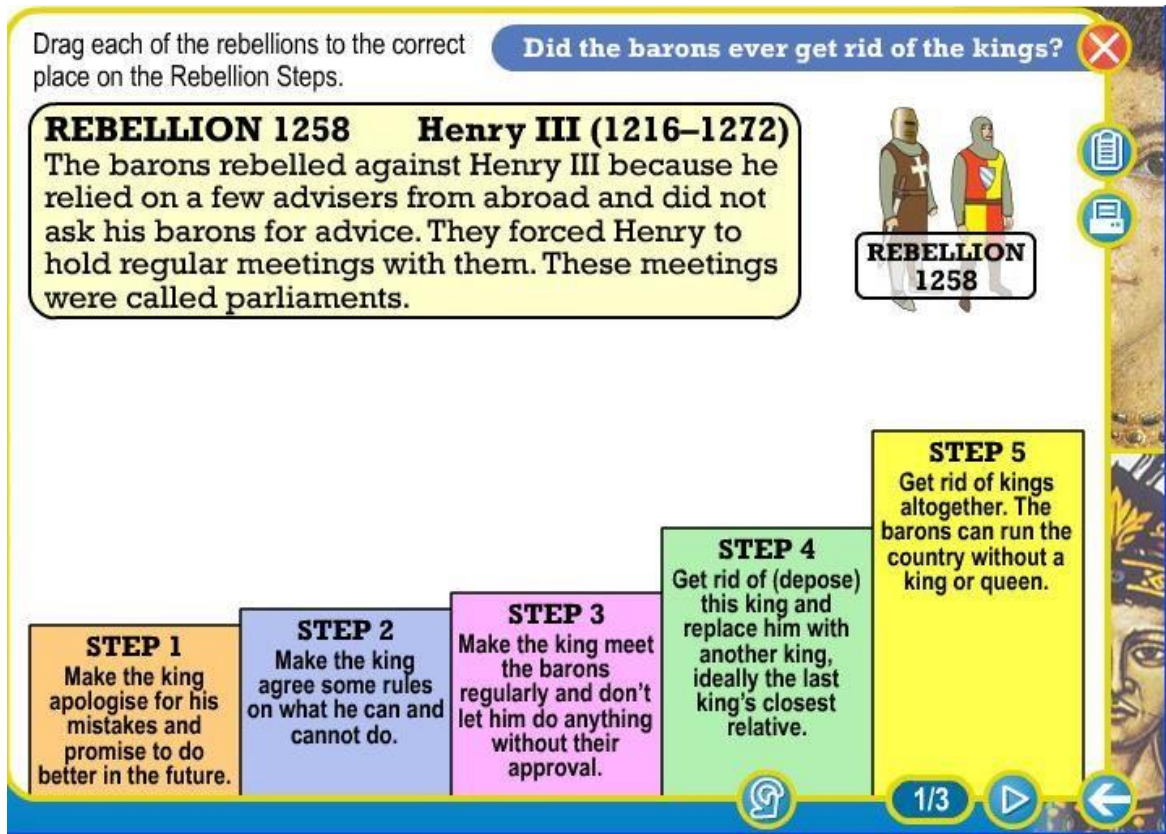
Example 3: The story of monarchy

King Cromwell? Andy Harmsworth and Ian Dawson, Hodder Education 2002



The graph above helps students link together what may appear to be a series of individual topics about monarchs from King John onwards (and maybe completes a story that can disappear from schemes of work after the mid 17thC). As with other overviews it can be used as a hypothesis to be tested by case-studies so it's given primacy rather than being an afterthought when the 'real work'

is done in depth studies ‘When did the power of the monarchy really decline?’ might make a worthwhile overview question. (The graph comes from an SHP book ‘King Cromwell?’ by Andy Harmsworth and myself.)



This Rebellion Steps diagram/activity is a different kind of overview, built around a critical takeaway about medieval monarchy – that people did not envisage government without monarchy, even in times of rebellion. Using a brief amount of information about individual kings, students can place monarchs on the correct steps – John on step 2, Henry II on 3, lots on 4 but no-one on 5 – until we get to 1649 which raises the important question ‘what had changed?’ The diagram can therefore be used both when covering the Middle Ages and revisited when you do reach 1649.

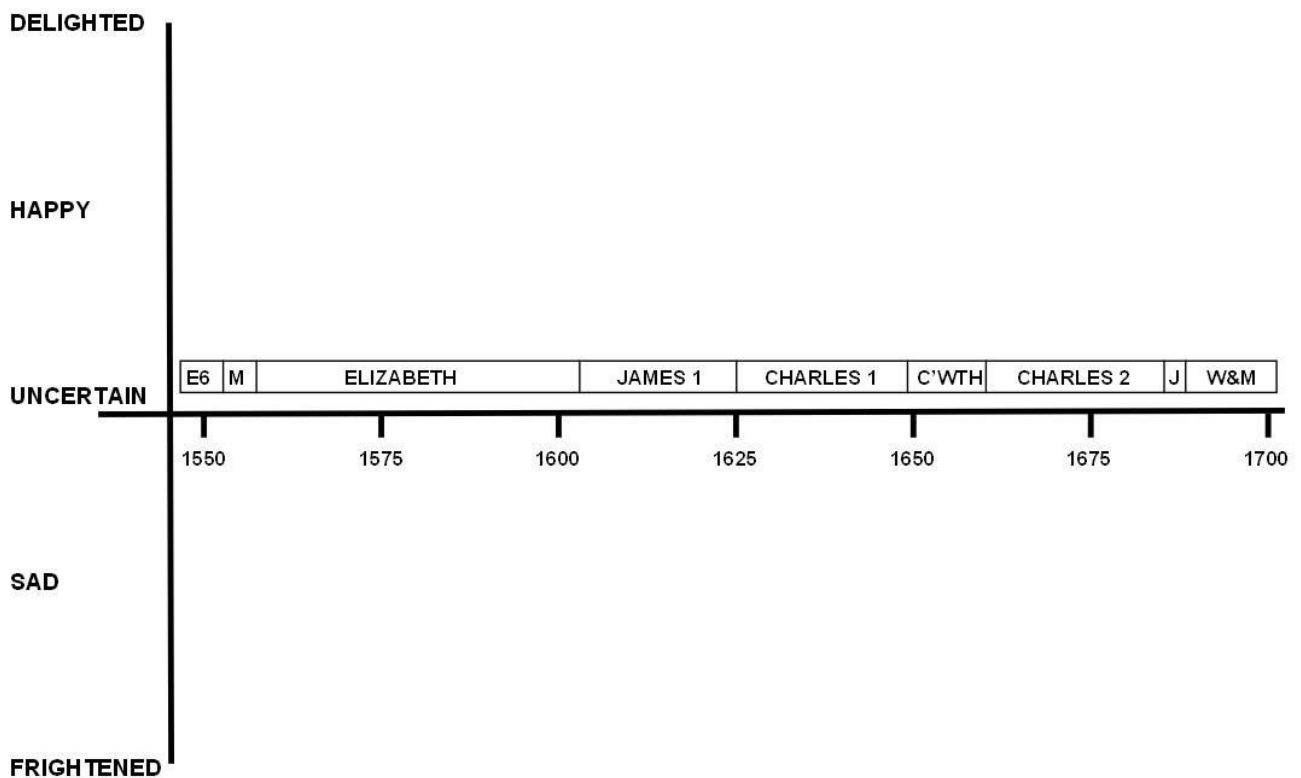
For resources see (though I didn't write them up very well in 2008 and must re-do them properly)

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/BigStoryOfMonarchy.html>

And here for an overview resource on monarchy after the Civil War:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/WhenDidPrimeMinisters.html>

Example 4: Religion 1500-1700



- Son of Henry VIII.
- Much simpler religion
 - No statues in churches
 - No wall-paintings
 - No chantry chapels
 - Church services in English
 - No colourful clothing for priests



- Mary brought back the Catholic faith.
- English church headed by the Pope again.
- Over 200 Protestants burned to death.
- Mary married the King of Spain.



This is a more physically involving thematic activity that helps students make sense of religious change. You'll find a full description at the link below but the idea is to divide the class into 3 groups – Puritan, Catholic and in-betweens – and ask them to respond to each change in religion. They can trace responses on the graph, using brief information on the slides provided (just 2 are included above). Yes it's brief and over-simplified information but this is an outline activity. It's one of those topics that eats up time if everything is covered in detail. Questions such as 'Why were there so many changes?' or 'Why were people so anxious about religious change?', the latter being my preference because it focusses on how people felt and experienced religious change.

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/NewReligion.html>

By way of concluding this section – one of the advantages of thematic enquiries is that they open up possibilities for content and questions which may not exist in a depth enquiry dominated scheme. Other themes which could be tackled in long-term overviews (contextualising depth studies within these topics) are climate, protest, migration, empires and their causes and effects, the development of the UK and warfare. As an example, 'Have the causes of war changed over time?' is a worthwhile question because of its continuing relevance and makes a good introduction to more detailed work on wars in the 20th century. Other examples of overviews can be found here:

<https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/Resource/AllResources.html#overview>

Mental Timelines of Other Cultures

Early on in this article I suggested that it's important to think about mental timelines in the context of diversifying the curriculum. There's an assumption that mental timelines focus on western Europe but students may easily make the assumption that periodisation based the familiar periods of Middle Ages, Early Modern etc applies universally when it clearly does not. Periods and terms such as prehistoric and Industrial Revolution happened at different times in different places. Other religions and civilisations use and have used other systems of dating. Therefore it's worth considering whether students should be introduced to mental timelines for other places and civilisations as part of diversifying the curriculum.

This could be done briefly when first introducing the idea of mental timelines and also as context for depth studies on other places and cultures or when undertaking a comparison of overviews of other places and cultures.

Conclusions: Takeaways from this article

Here's what I think are the key points in this article. To help students improve their chronological knowledge and understanding:

- We need to find out what sense students make of chronology and why they think (or don't) it's important – and then relate planning and teaching to students' preconceptions.
- Think in terms of three stages of planning:
 - i. Define chronological knowledge and understanding
 - ii. Identify the 'takeaways' about chronology to be aimed for by the end of the KS3 and for later years
 - iii. Plan how you will enable students to understand those takeaways through your curriculum and teaching
- Be consistently clear and explicit with students about how chronological knowledge and understanding helps them improve their work and grades in history.
- Prioritise and be explicit about establishing the idea of mental timelines and consider whether you wish to introduce students to mental timelines of civilisations beyond western Europe.

- At KS3 develop a balance of enquiries to boost students' mental timelines, including enquiries about individual periods of history and thematic enquiries across time.
- Explicit planning and teaching to help develop chronological knowledge and understanding is as important at A level as it is with younger students. Departments need to plan their approach to 'chronology' at GCSE and A level as well as KS3.
- It's a long-term project, not a quick fix. Don't rush and don't be disappointed if it takes longer than you first thought.