

# G.C.S.E. HISTORY

## AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

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### A. Introduction.

1. The attached syllabus is not offered in a spirit of opposition to GCSE. We welcome a single examination system for the whole ability range. We accept the National Criteria and welcome particularly the aim 'to stimulate interest in and enthusiasm for the study of the past'. (B.1.) We recognise that all too often traditional methods, with their emphasis on memory testing of dry detail, were unsatisfying to teachers and taught. We applaud the attempts to teach and examine school history in ways which engage the curiosity and interest of pupils. To the extent that the new approaches foster initiative, imagination, opportunities for independent thinking and criticism, and for building out from what the child readily understands and already knows to what he/she does not know, they are to be welcomed. 'Empathy', in the sense of the ability to look at events and issues from the perspective of people in other times, other places, is a civilising quality, well worth cultivating.
2. Having said this, it would be idle to deny that our syllabus does reflect dissatisfaction with the way the National Criteria have been interpreted, both in the construction of syllabuses and in the design of examinations. Words and phrases which are not in themselves objectionable have been put to work in a particular way. Our objections can be summed up under three heads.
3. The first is the absence of any syllabus designed to foster an understanding of what Sir Keith Joseph, when Secretary of State, called 'the development or the shared values which are a distinctive feature of British society and culture and which continue to shape private attitudes and public policy'.<sup>1</sup> The National Criteria certainly allow such a syllabus; but in line with the decision not to specify a 'minimum or core content' (para D.1.), they do not enjoin one. Each Examining Group is required to offer at least one syllabus in British History. But no school is required to choose it. And it does not have to be related to any central purpose. We regard the failure to specify a minimum content related to a central purpose as the main weakness of the National Criteria (History) as they now stand; a weakness which we hope will be remedied by the National Curriculum.
4. Second, we believe that the way the assessment objectives have been interpreted (though not the objectives themselves) place undue emphasis on 'concept and skills' at the expense of know
5. Finally, we believe there is scope for an alternative examination scheme within the framework of GCSE History. Current papers attach too much importance to assessing 'concepts and skills' **in isolation**. This is particularly true of 'empathy'. Further, we note that no Examining Group has yet availed itself of the option of setting: differentiated papers in history, as is done in some other subjects, such as mathematics.

6. In summary, we believe that the National Criteria are flexible enough to encompass a variety of approaches to teaching and examining school history. Our complaint is that the interpretation of the criteria by Examining Groups has reflected one approach - that of the so-called 'new history' - to the exclusion of others. Our purpose in presenting the attached syllabus is to offer schools a genuine choice between different approaches. We believe that there is a substantial demand for such an alternative; and that the new reforms in the organisation of schools, designed to make education more responsive to parental wishes, will help make that demand effective.

## **B. The New History: A Brief Retrospect.**

1. The postwar debate on how to teach and examine school history has been characterised as a clash between the relative merits of traditional history (a history heavy on national content, chronology, factually accumulated knowledge) and a 'new' history' (a history stressing process rather than product, paying scant attention to chronology, marginalising received knowledge, and constructing a range of histories from a range of sources).<sup>2</sup>

There were three influential objections to the 'old history' thus characterised:

2. First, some teachers found it boring to teach and it was alleged that many, if not most, pupils found it boring to learn. There was a perceived danger that pupils would vote with their feet, and that history would die out as a school subject unless it transformed itself.
3. Second, recent historical events notably the 'dwarfing' of Britain - cast doubt on the value of concentrating on the teaching of 'national' or 'heritage' history.
4. Third, the 'new' history built on a 'new' epistemology which emphasised the relativity of knowledge: the past is not discovered, it is 'constructed'; facts are selected and arranged to fit interpretations. The conclusion drawn was that no received body of knowledge was entitled to privileged status; on the contrary, pupils should be encouraged to 'deconstruct' historical texts; or at least be brought to understand why historians constructed them in the way they did.
5. In fact many of the criticisms of the 'old' history had already led to changes in teaching and examining practice in 'O' Level and CSE courses. This system allowed for a variety of approaches - for example, Schools Council History, with its emphasis on projects as against the traditional emphasis on essays. It is misleading to suggest that the old examination systems stood in the way of imaginative teaching or excluded varieties of historical interpretations.
6. In retrospect, it is exceedingly unfortunate that the debate between the 'old' and the 'new' history came to centre on the issue of 'content' versus 'skills'. Content became a hate word for everything the new historians disliked: British history, factual recall, received knowledge.

But this was to muddle up the question of what is taught with how it is taught. A content can be taught imaginatively or unimaginatively; the question of the justification of a particular content (e.g. British history) is quite separate from the question of how to teach it and how to examine it. But the case for a British content' was never effectively made.

Instead, the traditionalists were induced to accept a 'skills-led' approach as at least offering a guarantee of 'objectivity'.<sup>3</sup> leaving the radicals free to argue that 'skills', while an improvement on 'content', are themselves ideological and need to be deconstructed.<sup>4</sup>

Thus the two sides were able to agree Subject Criteria which virtually excluded specification of 'content', and relegated 'knowledge about the past' to one of seven aims, and one of four assessment objectives. What had started with the Schools Council History Project as an 'invitation to an approach' has become almost official doctrine, enforced by government fiat.<sup>5</sup>

7. Our contention is that much of the 'new history' should remain an 'invitation to an approach'. Fortunately, the Subject Criteria are sufficiently flexible, or ambiguous, for our purposes. Specifically, they secure our right to innovate in the matter of content, concepts and skills, and examinations, even if such innovations run counter to current fashion.

## C. Content

1. It is an axiom of the 'new history' that, because the choice of content involves value judgments, content should not be prescribed: for example 'How do you decide on the relative merits of alternative contents?'<sup>6</sup> However, one may agree with the first part of the proposition, without accepting the second. The question of content selection is simplified if we ask: what is school history for?'
2. We agree with Roger Hennessey<sup>7</sup> that school history should be centrally concerned with 'socialisation'. This is one of the two main aims of education in general, its other being to stimulate pupils to think for themselves. If we accept this aim British history automatically suggests itself as a foundation for any school history curriculum drawn up for British school-children. The question of how to divide up a particular syllabus between local, national, and world history can be treated undogmatically. We would merely point out that a 'national' framework can be made as elastic as one wants, given the 'effects that developments beyond Britain have had in moulding our own history as well as the not inconsiderable effects British activities and achievements have had overseas'.
3. There is a further point which touches directly on the justification of the syllabus we are offering. The British history taught should aim at uncovering the way British society has been knit together. This is not achieved merely by teaching self-contained chunks of British history. (e.g. Tudors and Stuarts), as was often done in the past. To trace distinctive features of our history back to their important sources requires extensive coverage in time; and concentration on the most important themes. The attached syllabus tries to achieve both; and also to avoid the overburdening with factual content which was the bane of the old outline history.
4. We believe there is no such syllabus on offer in GCSE at present. GCSE does not provide pupils with the opportunity to study the prominent features in the development of the United Kingdom through the span of historical time. The impact of the United Kingdom on the rest of the world has been largely ignored. The histories of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland are not covered adequately.
5. The logic of the argument points to a syllabus such as ours being made the core or foundation syllabus for the National Curriculum (History) 11-16, which would of course include GCSE. However, we would not wish to prejudge the outcome of current discussions on the National Curriculum, and would only stress the value of having such a syllabus on offer for GCSE. We also recognise that the argument for a foundation syllabus related to a socialising purpose becomes much weaker after GCSE, when the emphasis should switch to varieties of content and critical approaches to sources and interpretation.

## D. Concepts and Skills.

1. In emphasising 'process' or 'procedure' against 'product' or 'knowledge', the 'new historians' are guilty of three errors. First, the view that products are suspect, only procedures objective, is wrong. Most received knowledge is not in dispute, and procedures are open to manipulation. For example, thoughtlessly set 'empathy' assignments are an invitation to pupils to invent feelings which historical actors did not have. (This point is taken up in the next section). The second error is to confuse what is taught with how it is taught. Treating products as provisional may, in some cases, be an effective teaching device, encouraging the pupil to be a historical detective as, for example, in the 'mystery' of who murdered the Princes in the Tower. But these procedures should not be confused with the discovery of new knowledge. Third, procedures require products to work on. The selection, arrangement, and interpretation of facts requires knowledge of facts.
2. The conclusion we draw from this is that history is knowledge of the past: it is not a means to such knowledge. Most of the means to historical knowledge are not distinctive to history: they are part of the apparatus of human thought, common to all attempts to establish the facts of the case (including those facts which count as causes), and used equally by the scientist, the doctor, the lawyer, etc. Only an absurdly exaggerated view of the relativity of knowledge would lead anyone to suppose that methods of enquiry ('what historians do') constitute the core of the subject. We would attach much more importance, therefore, than does the 'new history' to

acquisition of knowledge (though this is not to be identified with just knowing dates, kings and queens, etc.), allowing for the development of concepts and skills and promoting self-discovery procedures in a framework of acquiring knowledge

3. Although most received historical knowledge is not in dispute, there are two major exceptions which must be given due weight. First, there are differing interpretations of important events. Secondly, the relative importance of different branches of historical study changes, as neglected areas assume greater significance in the light of later developments.
4. In our view, pupils should be made aware that there are differing views about the past, and about how to write about the past. An oddity of the assessment objectives of the National Criteria (History) is that while pupils are expected to 'show ability to look at events and issues from the perspective of people in the past (para C.3.) there is no comparable requirement that pupils should understand that there are different interpretations of the past.

An examination of why historians disagree, invoking famous historical controversies (e.g. the origins of the Civil War, the standard of living debate, etc.) would do far more to reveal the problematic character of much historical knowledge than the list of disembodied 'concepts and skills' which figure in the criteria.

5. Geoffrey Barraclough's notion of 'contemporary history' justifies the study of the origins of movements and issues which seem particularly salient today - for example, the women's movement, racial prejudice, multiculturalism, etc. It should be noted, though, that the 'new historians' tend to prefer the world that was 'coming to life in the 1960s to the world that is 'coming to life' in the 1980s, among whose features are the revival of capitalism, the disintegration of communism, the retreat from socialism, and the break-up of class allegiances. The fact that very different interpretations of the contemporary world are possible should suggest a suitable caution in adding fashionable subjects indiscriminately to the curriculum.
6. To summarise: we would like pupils to emerge from a school history course both with a substantial knowledge of the past and with an understanding of why historical knowledge is problematic. As pupils continue their study of history through GCSE and beyond the emphasis should switch from the historical to the historiographical, in recognition of the contested nature of much historical knowledge, and in line with the aim of teaching pupils to think for themselves.

## E. Assessment

1. The first runs of GCSE papers have drawn attention to two problems. The first arises from the attempt to break down assessment objectives into discrete units of competence carrying separate marks. The second stems from the difficulty of setting common papers which are fair to the whole ability range which can stretch those at the top without penalising those at the bottom. These two problems are related, insofar as the first represents an attempt, in part, to guarantee as many candidates as possible a pass grade in the new examination.
2. These purposes have produced a number of features which are open to objection. The first is the virtual disappearance of the old type of essay question. The point about an essay answer is that its sum is usually bigger or smaller than its parts, and so it favours the higher ability range at the expense of the lower ability range.
3. Secondly, a large proportion of questions are now based on so-called 'stimulus materials'. These consist, typically, of a picture or text, on which the examinee is asked a series of questions. Questions based on stimulus material are sometimes scarcely more than comprehension tests, which call for little actual historical knowledge. Their more subtle weakness is their tendency to steer answers by constricting the range of options. An example of such a directed question comes from last year's Southern Examining Group's Syllabus 4, Paper 1.

The candidate is given a number of sources describing the difficulties in the way of trade union organisation, and then asked: 'How far do /these/ sources help to explain the low pay and bad conditions of the British working classes during the first half of the nineteenth century? Many economists would argue that low wages were a function of low labour productivity and had nothing to do with the strength or weakness of trade union organisation. But there is nothing in the stimulus materials to make the candidate aware of this point. In general, stimulus materials

encourage a certain direction of response; he who chooses the materials directs the answer in a way which does not, in principle, occur in the kind of open-ended question: What were the chief causes of low wages in the 19th century?

4. The third problem is that examination schemes as highly structured as the present ones necessarily reduce the candidate's choice of question, since the testing of specified units of competence is facilitated when all candidates attempt to answer the same questions (especially when these are based on stimulus materials). Constriction of choice inevitably leads to constriction of syllabuses.
5. Finally, questions designed to test 'empathy' carry a strong risk of producing manipulated answers. Current examination schemes identify and reward three levels of empathetic understanding on an ascending scale: everyday empathy, in which pupils ascribe contemporary motives to past actors, stereotyped empathy in which they assume that all people in the past, while thinking differently than from today, thought the same way and differentiated empathy in which pupils understand that ideas and motives held by people in the past were not held uniformly, but differed from group to group, and individual to individual.

This method of testing empathy has itself been cogently criticised.<sup>8</sup> The flaws in this assessment scheme are most clearly revealed when it is considered in conjunction with an empathy assignment of the type: 'Imagine yourself to be.....'. To gain the maximum marks on such a question the pupil is required not just to understand the motives or feelings of his imagined person in the past, but also to ascribe empathetic understanding to the imagined person: an artificial, ahistorical, procedure. In such assignments a piece of genuine historical understanding is likely to be suppressed - that past ages were much more intolerant than our own.\*

6. There are a number of ways of dealing with this cluster of problems. While empathy should be taught, the way it is assessed itself requires to be re-assessed. There should be more choice of question, and a greater variety of question. This means less structured marking schemes. This in turn brings us back to the problem of fairness for the whole ability range. Most of the problems we have identified could be tackled more easily by abandoning the attempt to set questions suitable for the whole ability range.
7. We would suggest two possible approaches, both allowed for in the Subject Criteria. The first is differentiation by question within papers attempted by all. Some questions would allow candidates the whole range of grades (A-G) and others only grades C-G. This candidate-based differentiation would allow pupils to choose whether to answer all higher, or all lower, grade questions or a combination of both. Teaching of larger syllabuses would be facilitated and less able children, in particular, would benefit. Central, but not exclusive, importance would be given in higher grade questions to the ability to express judgment and understanding through essay writing. Papers based on differentiated questions would be difficult to achieve, but probably not impossible.
8. Our preference is for differentiation by paper. Under such a scheme, candidates would be required to attempt **two** out of **three** papers. They would all take the middle paper: the abler pupils would attempt the first paper, the less able the third. The first paper would have a larger proportion of essay questions; the third might place more emphasis on stimulus material. The first two papers would allow the candidates the whole range of grades, the last two only those from C-G.
9. These ideas are provisional and would require considerable further work to issue into an operational examination scheme. We believe, however, that it is possible, with the current GCSE History Criteria, to devise more flexible examination schemes, which are both fairer to higher and lower ability groups, and minimise the problems in question-setting which arise from the attempt to make the whole ability range answer the same questions.

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\* A good example of the invented answer comes from the Southern Examining Group's **GSE History Syllabuses 1-6 A Teacher Guide**. The empathy question is: 'How would you feel if you were a West Berliner/at the time of the Berlin blockade in 1948/ and you heard a train had arrived carrying food?' The 'best' sample answer was adjudged to be the one

*which read: 'Most people would be glad because this would mean the blockade was over.. some people though, communists and the like, would see this as the end of their hope that Berlin would be part of the East'.*

*The confusion between the pupil's ability to enter the mind of the West Berliner, and the West Berliner's ability to 'enter the mind' of communists and the like is clear. Yet in terms of the assessment scheme, the pupil who answered 'I would be extremely happy because we would have some food...' would score the lowest marks.*

## **F. The Requirements of a Valid Syllabus.**

1. We believe that the attached syllabus meets the criteria for evaluating content listed in **History in the Primary and Secondary Schools, an HMI View**, as stated below.

### **Evaluating the Syllabus.**

The following questions can be used as a basis for evaluating the content in a history scheme work.

- Does the history syllabus include some periods of national history?
  - Does the syllabus offer opportunities to learn something about the achievements of cultures within and outside Europe? Do these opportunities relate to the issues of an interdependent world and a multicultural society?
  - Does the syllabus make any contribution to the understanding of the contemporary world by putting it in his historical context, local as well as national?
  - Does the study or locality help towards developing some understanding of pupils' own roots and environment?
  - Does the study of the locality link its issues to those of the nation and the world beyond?
  - Does a study of these periods help pupils towards an understanding of the complicated relationship between political, social, economic technical and cultural aspects of society?
  - As history is concerned with change and continuity through time, are the themes chosen of sufficient chronological length to illustrate these concepts?
  - Does the syllabus help young people towards an understanding of why things are as they are, that things have not always been so, and that they will not necessarily always continue to be so?
2. Our syllabus clearly meets the first criterion. Sections 1 and 4 of the syllabus satisfy the second. The whole syllabus is designed to 'contribute to an understanding of the contemporary world'. Both coursework topics, and sections 1, 2, and 6 are designed to 'help towards developing some understanding of pupils own roots and environment'. Coursework provides an opportunity for the study of locality. Political, social, economic, technical, and cultural aspects are all covered, and their inter-relations are particularly stressed in section 5. The themes chosen are pursued at length. We believe all these understandings can be developed through the suggested syllabus.
  3. The syllabus's coverage through time is far longer than any other syllabus on offer. This can be made manageable by providing a wide choice of questions within each theme. But in addition, we would emphasise that the syllabus is designed either for a two year or a three year course. Either way, the second and third themes - 'Creating a United Kingdom' and 'The development of parliamentary democracy, rule of law, political liberty' - could be made compulsory, with candidates taking one additional theme. If it was taught over three years, students would have the advantage of being able to cover more of the themes.

## **G. Conclusion.**

1. We strongly believe that the attached syllabus and the ideas outlined in the justification offer a valid alternative to current orthodoxy. They provide a choice of ways of studying and assessing history which should be made available to all schools in the United Kingdom.

**NOTE** *The justification was written by Professor Robert Skidelsky. Both the syllabus and supporting arguments are endorsed by Professor Lord Beloff, Lord Bullock. Professor Ralph Davis. Professor Sir Geoffrey Elton, Professor Norman Stone, Lord Thomas of Swinerton and Professor John Vincent.*

## References

1. Sir Keith Joseph, 'Why Teach History in School?', Speech to the Historical Association Conference. 1 February 1984.
2. Keith Jenkins and Peter Brickley, 'Whose Past?', **TES**. 8 April 1988.
3. DES. History in the Primary and Secondary Years :an HMI View, (1985) p.29
4. Jenkins and Brickley. From 'Skillology' to 'Methodology'. **Teaching History**, No.46, October 1986, p.5. Note particularly their stress on the need to 'problematise' the 'totality of history'.
5. Jenkins and Brickley. **Teaching History**, No.46, October 1986, p.4.
6. Jenkins and Brickley, **TES**, 9 April 1988.
7. R.A.S. Hennessey. 'The Content Question: An Agenda', **Welsh Historian**. Spring 1958. The first three paragraphs of this section are indebted to Mr. Hennessey's article.
8. Ann Low-Ber, 'Feeling Doubtful: Is it Possible to Examine Empathy?'. **Times Educational Supplement**. 10 April 1987. 'It is particularly difficult to accept that 'stereotyped' and differentiated empathy are in a developmental, hierarchical, relationship

## THE MAKING OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

**Theme:** The evolution of the United Kingdom and its impact on the modern world.

**Aims:** As G.C.S.E. but add - "to promote an awareness that there are differing views about the past and about the subject".

**Assessment objectives:** As G.C.S.E.

**NOTE:** This syllabus can be studied over two OR three years. This makes no difference to the examination scheme, in which two themes (say 2 and 3) could be prescribed, with students having a choice of one of the remaining four. Over a three-year course, they would have the opportunity to cover more of the themes.

## Syllabus:

### 1. Creating the People

Immigration and settlement patterns: pre-Celtic, Celtic, Roman, Saxon. Anglo-Danish, Norman.

Later immigrants: e.g. Flemings, Huguenots, Jews, West Indians, Asiatics.

Language development and diversity.

The evidence of place-names.

The influence exerted on life in the United Kingdom by different groups.



## **6. National Histories**

- Aspects or the History of Wales.
- Aspects or the History of Scotland.
- Aspects or the History of Ireland
- Aspects or me 'Home' Histories of Selected Immigrant Groups.

### **Coursework:**

- History for Tourism: a local study.
- Evidence or developments through time from a local study.
- A Biography, demonstrating the use of source material and relating the subject's life against the events of the time.

### **OR**

- An 'unseen' exercise on using source material, or putting together a history from evidence supplied.

This syllabus is the work of Cristopher McGovern and his colleagues in the History Department of Lewes Priory School.