

Press release



History should be taught to all children up to the age of 16

Only a quarter of young adults say they know about Admiral Nelson. Even fewer, only one in seven, know about Field Marshal Montgomery, who commanded our armed forces on D-Day.

The Battle of Waterloo, which sealed the defeat of Napoleon, is only known about by just over a third of young people.

Oliver Cromwell, who was crucial to the development of democracy in Britain and whose statue stands outside the Houses of Parliament, is known about by only 44 per cent of young adults.



Only a quarter of young adults know about Admiral Nelson

The disturbing lack of knowledge among young adults is because of the truncated teaching of history in our schools. Most advanced countries - such as Germany, France, Italy and Australia - teach history to all children up to the age of 16 or more. Britain is an outlier in having history as a mandatory subject only until the age of 14.

The failure to teach children for longer is due to a decision taken by the Secretary of State for Education in 1988 – a decision he later came to regret.

This mistake should be put right. Knowledge of history is vital for a rounded education and equips people to be voting citizens. History should be taught to all children up to the age of 16.

“This is an excellent cause”

Dominic Sandbrook, co-host of The Rest Is History

Published 19th November 2025.



The Foundation for the History of Totalitarianism is a non-profit organisation established to provide information and education about the history of totalitarianism, particularly in the 20th century. It aims to encourage study and research in a variety of ways including an annual history essay competition for sixth-formers on a different subject each year.

Honorary President: Lord Finkelstein

Trustees:

Professor Aleksander Szczerbiak - chairman

Professor Hugo de Burgh

Dr Natalia Murray

Peter Rendek

James Bartholomew

Roger Moorhouse

Website: <https://historyoftotalitarianism.com/>

Email: contact@historyoftotalitarianism.com

X: [@HofTotalitarian](#) Facebook: [Foundation for the History of Totalitarianism](#)



"As a result of ill-considered decisions taken more than thirty years ago, children in the UK are not required to study History beyond the age of 14. In the majority of OECD countries, History is compulsory to age 16 or older. Perhaps not surprisingly, the latest polling reveals alarming ignorance of both British and world history among Britons aged 18 to 24. I endorse the recommendation in this report that History should become a compulsory subject at GCSE."



Niall Ferguson,

Milbank Family Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution, Stanford University.



"This is an excellent cause. History isn't just the foundation of our national identity, it's also a brilliant way to explore what it means to be human. And given the richness and importance of our history, it's nothing short of disgraceful that we don't teach it to all children until the age of 16."

Dominic Sandbrook

Historian of Britain and America; co-host of the world's most popular history podcast, *The Rest is History*.



‘We know from the news every day that people are capable of behaving heroically, yet we do not teach schoolchildren about the greatest heroes of our collective past. This leads to a form of national cultural suicide, which we have been seeing in our society ever since the insane decision to stop teaching compulsory history up to 16. It is also cruel to children not to let them know these uplifting stories about the giants of our British past. Many congratulations to the team at the excellent Foundation for the History of Totalitarianism for leading the fightback.’

Baron (Andrew) Roberts of Belgravia

*Author of *The Storm of War*, *Napoleon the Great* and *Churchill: Walking with Destiny*.*

Report



All children should learn history up to the age of 16

Young people today are growing up with gaping voids in their knowledge of British and world history. Among young adults (aged 18-24), only one in four know about Admiral Lord Nelson, victor of the Battle of Trafalgar. Only one in seven knows about Field Marshal Montgomery, who led the armed forces at D-Day which led to the liberation of Western Europe.

Their knowledge of world history is only slightly better. A majority say they know about Julius Caesar and the French Revolution (61 per cent in both cases). But fewer than a quarter know about the Cultural Revolution in China and only one in seven knows about the Great Terror in the Soviet Union in which 700,000 to 1.2million were killed by Stalin to cement his personal power. Here are the highlights from our exclusive polling:



British history

Percentage of people who have “heard of and know about”.

| Subject | Age 65+ | Age 18-24 |
|--------------------------|---------|-----------|
| Field Marshal Montgomery | 88% | 14% |
| Admiral Nelson | 91% | 25% |
| The Battle of Waterloo | 88% | 36% |
| Oliver Cromwell | 90% | 44% |

| | | |
|------------------------------|------------|------------|
| William the Conqueror | 90% | 58% |
| Florence Nightingale | 95% | 60% |
| D-Day | 96% | 64% |
| The Tudors | 90% | 67% |

World history

Percentage of people who have “heard of and know about”.

| Subject | Age 65+ | Age 18-24 |
|--------------------------------|----------------|------------------|
| The Great Terror | 10% | 14% |
| The Cultural Revolution | 36% | 23% |
| The Ottoman Empire | 56% | 37% |
| The French Revolution | 78% | 61% |
| Julius Caesar | 87% | 61% |
| The Holocaust | 92% | 83% |

Whitestone surveyed 2079 UK adults online from 18th to 20th August 2025. Data were weighted to be representative of all adults. Whitestone is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. Full tables at www.whitestoneinsight.com

Our poll reveals widespread ignorance of major events in British and world history among young British people (18-24).

A second revelation is that older adults (over 65) know much more than young adults. Only a quarter of young adults know about Admiral Nelson whereas more than nine in ten older adults know about him - a massive contrast.

Only 44 per cent of young people know about Oliver Cromwell whereas, again, nine out of ten older people know about him. These figures suggest a dropping off in recent times in the teaching of British history. Cromwell is an essential figure in the development of British democracy which is why there is a statue of him outside the Houses of Parliament. It is an embarrassing failure that a majority of young people do not know about him.

Only a modest majority (58 per cent) even say that they know about William the Conqueror, the person at the beginning of the development of modern Britain.

Knowledge of young adults about world history appears to be slightly better. A majority know about the French Revolution and Julius Caesar (61 per cent). But shouldn't *all* of them

know about these key subjects? The French Revolution was arguably the most significant moment in the history of our nearest neighbour. Julius Caesar conquered Gaul (modern France) and caused the end of the Roman Republic and beginning of the Roman Empire which was at the very foundation of modern Europe. Here again, a higher proportion of older people know about these subjects (78 per cent and 87 per cent respectively). It is possible that some of the older people learned about these subjects in adult life. But previous research suggests that most people learn most of their history at school. 72% of Britons list school history as one of their top three sources of historical knowledge.¹

Our poll is supported by previous studies. Surveys have consistently shown that younger people have worse historical knowledge than older generations. In 2024, YouGov completed polling on public awareness of key historical figures and events. Whilst those over 50 averaged a score of 6.16 correct answers out of 10, under 35s averaged just 3.77 right answers.² More under 35s thought Winston Churchill served as Supreme Allied Commander in Europe in the Second World War than answered Dwight D. Eisenhower. Over 50s were 25 points more likely to know that the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended the war in the Pacific than those under 35. Fewer than one in four schools teaches the battles of Agincourt, Trafalgar and Waterloo as part of their Key Stage 3 history curriculums.³

This work reflects previous polling on public historical knowledge. Polling conducted by Policy Exchange found that fewer than one in five reported being 'significantly familiar' with key events such as the Norman Conquest, the signing of Magna Carta and the Battles of Trafalgar and Waterloo.⁴

England is an international outlier

In England, history is a compulsory subject only until the end of Key Stage 3 (11-14 years old). At this point, the majority of children drop the subject.

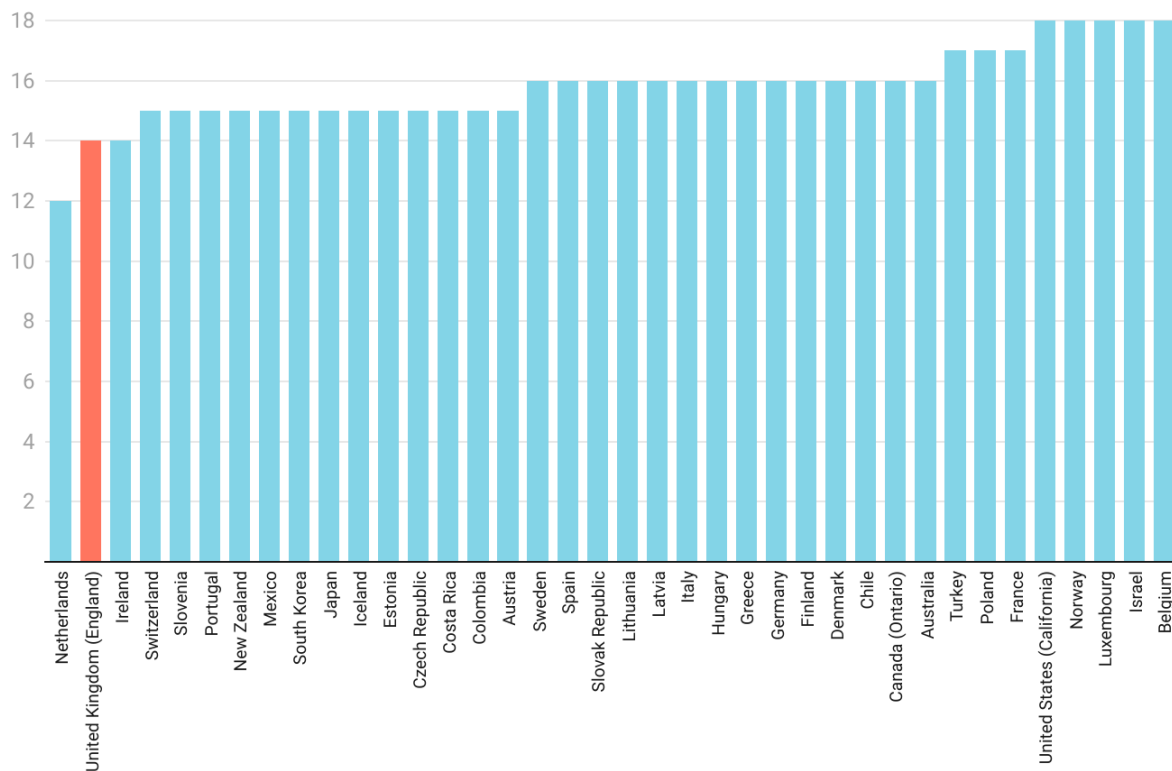
There is no official figure and estimates vary. *The Guardian* surveyed exam boards in 2020 and found that “Fewer than half of students doing GCSEs in England, 45%, take history.”⁵ In 2023, Cambridge University Press and Assessment, which runs the OCR exam board, estimated that 44.3% of GCSE students take history based on published data from the Department of Education.⁶ Policy Exchange estimated that 47% of GCSE students studied the subject, based on Freedom of Information request responses from 249 secondary schools in England.⁷

If we take the middle figure off these three estimates, a majority of pupils – 55 per cent – give up history at 14 years old.

This means that most English children only study history for their first 3 years of secondary school. In some cases, this is even shorter. Since 2010, a minority of schools (approximately 12%) have started GCSEs in Year 9, meaning their children may receive only 2 years of history education at secondary school.⁸

This makes England an outlier amongst developed nations. England has the joint second lowest age at which history ceases to be compulsory of all 38 OECD countries. Across the OECD, the most common age for compulsory history education to end is 16 – two years older than in England. Germany, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Australia and Canada are among the majority of countries which have decided that history should be taught at least to the age of 16. France and Poland go further and believe it should be taught until 17. Norway and Belgium take it right up to 18. In more than one out of five OECD countries, history is compulsory until 17 or older.

Age to which history is compulsory within the school curriculum (OECD countries)



In some OECD countries, history is taught as part of wider ‘social studies’ programmes rather than as a discrete subject. In some countries, history may be taught intensively in one year and then not at all in another. However, the overall quantity of history teaching is generally much higher than in England. The majority of children in England – those who give up history at 14 - receive 140 fewer hours history teaching over their school careers than children in other OECD countries.

This has a profound impact. In most comparable countries, children have the opportunity to study more history over a longer period and in more depth.

Teaching history in some other countries

France

In France, history is taught to all children from the ages of nine to 17. In primary and lower secondary education this is delivered in a combined history-geography programme which, between ages 11 and 14, also includes civics.⁹ Assuming history comprises at least half of the study time in such lessons, this means French children receive over 270 hours of history teaching between the ages of 9 and 14 alone. However, the fact that history remains compulsory between 15 and 17 – even for those on vocational courses – means that children benefit from 75 hours of further social science study. This is even higher for children on academic and technical pathways.

This lesson time enables the French schools to teach early modern, modern and contemporary history of the nation state, local regions, Europe and the wider world.¹⁰ Children learn the full breadth of French history, from Charlemagne to Charles de Gaulle.

Australia

History is compulsory in Australia until the end of Year 10, when most children are 16 years old. All states and territories follow the Australian Curriculum although with some local variation. The most recent version of the curriculum was released in 2022.¹¹ Children are expected to study 37-40 hours history each week between 8 and 11 and between 43 and 50 hours of history each week between 11 and 16.¹²

Australia has a sweeping curriculum covering Australian history and that of the wider world. Year 7 (11–12-year-olds) focuses on the ancient world with topics ranging from ancient Egypt to ancient China.¹³ Years 8 and 9 cover the period of change from the ancient to the modern world with topics as diverse as Renaissance Italy, the Spanish conquest of the Americas and the Industrial Revolution. The curriculum at 15 to 16 focuses on global history and the emergence of the modern Australian nation state. Children learn about the formative years of World War Two and the influence of migration on contemporary Australia.

Spain

In Spain, all children must study history up until the age of 16, with many children taking the subject up to 17.¹⁴ From 6 to 15, history is taught as a combined programme with geography. The curriculum is devolved to local areas but, in most cases, children enjoy a broad curriculum covering local and national history with a particular focus on the modern period.

The 'History of Spain' unit, taken by all general and art school children in their final year of school, is a notable exception to this decentralised model. With a focus on contemporary history but covering the broad sweep from pre-history to the present, the paper is a core part of national university entry exams. The stated purpose of the paper is to ensure children become **'responsible citizens, aware of their rights and obligations, as well as their heritage'**.¹⁵

Luxembourg

Luxembourg's system is unusual in retaining a clear focus on compulsory history across an otherwise tiered system of education. From the age of 11, children in all three kinds of secondary schools – general, classical and vocational – study some history until the age of 18.¹⁶

The Luxembourg curriculum places a strong focus on history as a tool for citizenship. All children learn national, European and wider world history. Although schools have autonomy over what specific subjects to teach, in both general and vocational education, history is taught in conjunction with civics from the ages of 15 to 18.

As these case studies demonstrate, additional years of compulsory history enable other developed nations to plan broad, chronological curriculums that help children understand the history of their own countries and the wider world. **It also gives these countries the opportunity to teach history to older children who are more equipped to understand, retain and think about what they have learned – something that is not possible with the current cut-off at 14 in England.**

How history was downgraded in the British curriculum (and the Secretary of State who regretted what he had done)

In the 1950s and 1960s, it was normal for those children who took “O” levels (the equivalent of GCSEs at the time) to take history. Many children left school at 15 but, of course, grammar school children stayed longer. (The school-leaving age was not raised to 16 until 1972). A government report in 1952 noted that the pattern of history teaching in grammar schools varied but that three quarters of these schools followed a similar history syllabus up until the age of 16 in response to the emerging exam system.¹⁷ No mention is made in this report of any students in these schools ceasing to study history before the age of 16. It seems possible – even likely - that this is because all the pupils in these schools were continuing history until 16. It is only when the report deals with A levels that it refers to grammar school students ceasing to study history. Even then, half of them continued to study the subject.

But in the 1960s and 1970s, relatively low economic growth led to a change in the political atmosphere. Many commentators, in their search for an explanation for Britain’s low growth rate, thought that Germany’s growth rate, which was high in the post-war years, was due to its focus on engineering. Others thought that Britain was too focused on the arts and should do more science.

Harold Wilson, leader of the opposition Labour Party, made a famous speech at the 1963 Labour Party conference in which he called for a “scientific revolution”. He said this revolution “cannot become a reality unless we are prepared to make far-reaching changes in economic and social attitudes which permeate our whole system of society”. A reformed Britain was “going to be forged in the white heat of this revolution”. **He argued that ‘to train the scientists we are going to need will mean revolution in our attitude to education’.**¹⁸

The Newsom Report the same year argued against the entrenchment of traditional subjects like history and **argued that less academic children should instead focus on subjects which were perceived to be more likely to lead to jobs in industry and technology.**¹⁹ So in these two ways, there was a movement away from history. This was the cultural background for the political and educational elite leading up to the Education Reform Act in 1988.

The act introduced the National Curriculum for the first time and, with it, a ‘tiering’ of subjects based on their importance. This act could have been an opportunity to guarantee every child a rigorous and extensive education in history. Then Education Secretary Kenneth Baker wanted to make history a ‘foundation’ subject (the highest tier), which would make it compulsory at GCSE. However, when the National Curriculum was finalised in 1991, the tide of the current thinking pushed aside this idea. **The new Education Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, dropped Baker’s plans and decided to give children a choice between History or Geography at GCSE – a change he subsequently came to regret.**²⁰ He remarked in an interview, **“Yes, I was persuaded of that. I’m not sure with hindsight... it’s a pity, in a way, I did that.”**



Kenneth Clarke

It is ironic that the man who allowed history to be reduced in importance also remarked, ““The role of history in our education has been diminished and ought to be increased.”

History continued to be under fire for the rest of the century from the political focus on maths and science subjects at the expense of the arts and humanities. The launch of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tables in 2000 added to this, sparking a push throughout the West to focus on STEM subjects, which were seen by leaders as the key to future employment and growth.²¹ This was further cemented in 2010 by the Coalition Government through the launch of the English Baccalaureate. This new Baccalaureate focussed children on six subjects, half of which were STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) but only one of which was a humanity.

As a result of all these developments, a massive contrast had been created between the amount of science taught to 14-16 year-olds compared to the amount of history. The figures for those taking GCSEs in 2023 show that almost three times as many students took the double award in science as took history. Even this figure understates the extraordinary contrast since still more students did individual sciences rather than the double award.

Top ten GCSE full course subjects in 2023

| Ranking | | Subject | % of total | Number of Entries |
|---------|------|-------------------------|------------|-------------------|
| 1 | (1) | Science: Double Award* | 15.8 | 935,436 |
| 2 | (2) | Mathematics | 13.9 | 821,322 |
| 3 | (3) | English | 13.4 | 788,780 |
| 4 | (4) | English Literature | 10.6 | 627,828 |
| 5 | (5) | History | 5.3 | 311,146 |
| 6 | (6) | Geography | 5.0 | 293,319 |
| 7 | (7) | Religious Studies | 4.1 | 243,735 |
| 8 | (8) | Art and Design subjects | 3.4 | 198,302 |
| 9 | (9) | Biology | 3.2 | 191,298 |
| 10 | (10) | Chemistry | 3.1 | 184,069 |

(2022 ranking in brackets.) *Science: double award counts as two entries per student.

Source: Joint Council for Qualifications, <https://www.jcq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/GCSE-Project-and-Entry-Level-Trends-2023.pdf>

The impact on the nature of history teaching was also disastrous. Since compulsory history in schools had to be completed by the age of 14, the history curriculum up to that age was overburdened with too much history and not enough time. It is a problem that started in 1991 and, despite subsequent changes to the National Curriculum, that problem has effectively continued to this day.

Finally, in 2025, it became compulsory for children to be in education or training until the age of 18. But the amount of history teaching was not increased. **Therefore, the proportion of history in the total teaching of children became even smaller. England was left with one of the widest gaps in the world between the overall age of compulsory education and the age to which history is a mandatory subject.**

There is no evidence that the emphasis on STEM subjects has led to any increase in economic growth

The sad irony in this story is that history has been demoted in importance on the basis that emphasising STEM subjects would improve the rate of the U.K.'s economic growth but there has been no evidence to suggest that it has had this effect. If anything, the evidence is the other way around. Germany, which teaches history to all children up to the age of 16, has had faster economic growth than the UK so far this century. The GDP per capita in Britain has grown 74 per cent whereas that of Germany has increased by 127 per cent. Meanwhile the GDP per capita in France, which teaches history for three more years than England (until 17), has grown by 100 per cent and that of Poland, which also teaches all children history for three more years, has grown a remarkable 387 per cent.

There appears to have been absolutely no improvement in economic growth resulting from the downgrading of history teaching

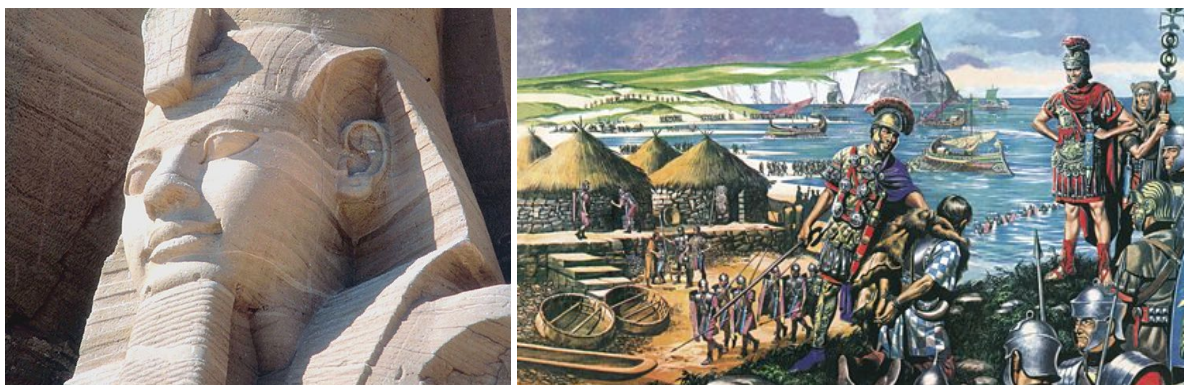
It is possible to suggest that many politicians and other policymakers, who imagine that they understand where economic growth comes from, are mistaken. In any case, economic growth is not the sole purpose of education. Education has many other purposes and one of the most important is to create people with a rounded understanding of the world and an ability to be good citizens.

The damage inflicted on history teaching

The average English pupil receives only 208 hours of history teaching from a specialist secondary teacher before the subject becomes optional at GCSE.²² Whilst that may sound like a lot, it equates to less than two hours a week on average. How can we expect children to develop a detailed knowledge and analytical understanding of British and world history in so little time?

We can't and children don't. The lack of time forces all schools to make a series of undesirable trade-offs. Schools are forced to choose whether to cover many topics in a superficial way, which often leaves children confused and put off by the subject, or to teach a narrow curriculum in greater depth, which leaves children without a sense of the chronological sweep of history. Neither approach is acceptable. Prominent public historian Lord (Andrew) Roberts has warned of the danger of a narrow, 'greatest hits' history curriculum calling it the 'Henry to Hitler' problem – where England's children jump from the Tudor monarchs to the twentieth century with almost no knowledge of and context from the intervening period.²³

The lack of time for history creates a further, crucial defect. Many children only learn about certain periods in the past at a very early age and, therefore, at a superficial level. It cannot be right that almost all history pre-1066 – the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and Vikings – is only taught at primary school and by non-expert teachers. It is wrong that the knowledge England's young people have of our Roman past, which continues to shape our lives in so many ways, is too often stuck at the level of a 7-year-old.



Time shortages mean most English children never learn about the ancient world beyond primary school

Tensions also inevitably arise over the balance between teaching British history and that of the wider world. Yet for a country that has had as global a past as Britain's, the failure to teach world history properly impoverishes their understanding of our national story. In a globalised world, young people should know some of the history of the different people they meet and the countries they see on television. It means our young people are ignorant of many of the great, international movements of the twentieth century, including the rise of fascism and communism. Less than a quarter of young people in our polling had heard of the Cultural Revolution in China and fewer than 15% knew about The Great Terror, the Holodomor or the Prague Spring.

Historical knowledge is a vital part of citizenship

Citizens are voters. They must be equipped to participate in political life. That is impossible when citizens do not have a shared sense of a nation's past and do not understand how their country has got to its present state.

A shared sense of history is crucial for identity. It makes people feel they have a past in common. It also gives them a cultural shorthand to engage with their fellow citizens – a shared set of facts on which to base arguments and decisions.

History helps people to understand why the world is the way that it is. Institutions and ideas like Parliament, democracy, a constitutional monarchy and religious tolerance do not make sense without a historical awareness of how they have come to be. In a country as old as Britain, the structure of government has evolved over time and has been the resolution of conflicting forces.

History also equips citizens and voters to make better decisions. The past is a back-catalogue of successes and failures that people can draw on in the present. A citizen with a secure knowledge of the past is much more likely to be able to effectively assess the costs and benefits of declaring war, replacing an institution or forging an alliance with another country.

Many authoritarian and totalitarian regimes have sought to downplay or rewrite history for their own ends. Such regimes know that historically illiterate citizens are less well equipped to hold governments to account and challenge despotism.

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

George Santayana, Spanish-American philosopher.²⁴

What should be done?

England is an international outlier amongst similarly developed countries. The failure over decades properly to value history within the school curriculum, culminating in the last-ditch curtailment of mandatory history at 14 in 1991, has left children without the time to develop sufficient historical knowledge to be informed members of society or active citizens.

The impact has been profound. England's young people are ignorant about many key events and individuals in our national past, let alone the wider world. How can we have an engaged and educated electorate if less than half of young adults know about Oliver Cromwell? Can we justify the fact that most children will never learn anything about events before 1066 once they turn 11? Something must change.

We cannot afford to become a nation ignorant of our past, where more than half of children grow up without the knowledge and analytical skills that history delivers to be effective citizens. Every British citizen has the right to know the history of their country and the ways in which it has interacted with the world.

Our recommendation is simple – the fatal mistake made in 1991 must be rectified. The Government's ongoing Curriculum Review should acknowledge that:

History should become a compulsory subject at GCSE, bringing England in line with other OECD countries that end compulsory history at 16.

“The whole point of education is not just utilitarian, it is to produce civilised, rounded people who contribute to a strong, healthy society.”

Kenneth Clarke, Education Secretary 1990-92

More detailed data from the poll

The question: "Have you heard of or know what each of these is known for?"

British history

Oliver Cromwell

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 68% | 44% | 90% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 24% | 29% | 10% |
| Have not heard of | 9% | 27% | - |

Admiral Nelson

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 63% | 25% | 91% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 23% | 27% | 8% |
| Have not heard of | 14% | 47% | - |

The Battle of Waterloo

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 66% | 36% | 88% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 27% | 41% | 12% |
| Have not heard of | 8% | 23% | - |

Florence Nightingale

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 81% | 60% | 95% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 14% | 27% | 4% |
| Have not heard of | 5% | 13% | - |

Field Marshal Montgomery

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 47% | 14% | 88% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 22% | 18% | 10% |
| Have not heard of | 31% | 68% | 1% |

D-Day

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 83% | 64% | 96% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 13% | 22% | 4% |
| Have not heard of | 4% | 14% | - |

William the Conqueror

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 71% | 58% | 90% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 24% | 26% | 10% |
| Have not heard of | 5% | 16% | - |

The Tudors

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 76% | 67% | 90% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 18% | 18% | 10% |
| Have not heard of | 6% | 15% | - |

World history

The French Revolution

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 63% | 61% | 78% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 32% | 32% | 22% |
| Have not heard of | 5% | 8% | 1% |

The Great Terror

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 11% | 14% | 10% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 18% | 24% | 17% |
| Have not heard of | 70% | 62% | 73% |

Julius Caesar

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 74% | 61% | 87% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 21% | 29% | 13% |
| Have not heard of | 4% | 9% | 1% |

The Cultural Revolution

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 25% | 23% | 36% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 31% | 28% | 33% |
| Have not heard of | 44% | 49% | 31% |

The Holocaust

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 86% | 83% | 92% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 10% | 8% | 7% |
| Have not heard of | 4% | 9% | 1% |

The Holodomor

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 8% | 12% | 3% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 8% | 15% | 4% |
| Have not heard of | 84% | 73% | 93% |

The Prague Spring

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 16% | 10% | 28% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 17% | 22% | 18% |
| Have not heard of | 66% | 67% | 53% |

The Ottoman Empire

| | All | 18-24 | 65+ |
|---|-----|-------|-----|
| Have heard of and know about | 45% | 37% | 56% |
| Have heard of but don't know anything about | 35% | 33% | 36% |
| Have not heard of | 20% | 31% | 7% |

Further background information

The Historical Association reported in 2021 that, in a survey of schools, 80% reported that all students were given a completely free choice of whether to take history at GCSE but the rest of the schools indicated that students might be discouraged or actively prevented from opting for the subject. Students' current attainment or low levels of literacy "were most commonly seen as barriers that meant that it was not worthwhile for students to continue with the subject".²⁵

¹ Policy Exchange, 'Lessons From the Past', May 2025.

² UK Polling Report, 'How much do people know about our history?', 22 August 2024.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Policy Exchange, 'Lessons From the Past', May 2025.

⁵ Black British history: the row over the school curriculum in England | Education | The Guardian

⁶ <https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/705285-uptake-of-gcse-subjects-2022.pdf>

⁷ <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/lessons-from-the-past/> p44.

⁸ <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/lessons-from-the-past/>

⁹ Observatory on History Teaching in Europe, 'France'.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Australian Government: Department of Education, 'Australian Curriculum'.

¹² Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 'Australian Curriculum: Humanities and Social Sciences', April 2014.

¹³ Australian Curriculum, 'History: Sequence of content 7-10'.

¹⁴ Observatory on History Teaching in Europe, 'Spain'.

¹⁵ A. Delgado, 'Educational reforms and teaching of history in contemporary Spain – nation, history and education as contested issue', 2023, History Education Research Journal.

¹⁶ Observatory on History Teaching in Europe, 'Luxembourg'.

¹⁷ <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/yxk3pkcf/items> *Teaching History*, Ministry of Education, p11.

¹⁸ British Library, 'Recording of the week: Harold Wilson's 1963 pledge to harness the white heat of a scientific revolution', 2 October 2023

¹⁹ David Cannadine et al., 'The Right Kind of History', 2011, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 151.

²⁰ History in Education, 'Interview with Kenneth Clarke', 28 January 2010. "Yes, I was persuaded of that. I'm not sure with hindsight, it's a pity, in a way, I did that."

²¹ Heidi Ashton, 'Cutting the STEM of future skills: beyond the STEM vs art dichotomy in England', April 2023, Arts and Humanities in Higher Education.

²² Policy Exchange, 'Lessons From the Past', May 2025.

²³ Aspects of History, 'Andrew Roberts'

²⁴ In 1905, George Santayana published "The Life of Reason, or The Phases of Human Progress". The twelfth chapter titled "Flux and Constancy In Human Nature" contained this famous sentence.

²⁵ Historical Association Survey of History in Secondary Schools in England 2021, p28, by Katharine Burn and Richard Harris. <https://www.history.org.uk/secondary/categories/409/news/4014/historical-association-secondary-survey-2021>

Summary

There are major gaps in the historical knowledge of younger people.

Our exclusive new polling has found that only a quarter of young adults (18 to 24 years old) know about Admiral Nelson. A mere one in seven knows about Field Marshal Montgomery, who led the armed forces on D-Day to liberate Western Europe. Less than half know about Oliver Cromwell. This level of ignorance is extraordinary for a country where children are schooled for more years than ever before – from four to 18.

England is an international outlier

In England, history ceases to be compulsory at 14 – the joint second lowest age of all 38 OECD countries. On average, children in England who don't continue with history receive 140 fewer hours of history than their peers in other countries who study the subject to 16.

History became an optional subject in 1991 – a decision which the Secretary of State came to regret.

In 1991, the decision was made not to make history a compulsory GCSE subject. This had disastrous consequences. An obsession with STEM subjects has led to neglect of the importance of history in creating an informed citizenry. The Secretary of State who made this fateful decision came to regret what he had done.

Curtailed history teaching means patchy, confusing history

England suffers from a bloated curriculum with too much content and too little time. In history, this forces schools to cherry-pick topics and leaves children confused and alienated. Too many historical topics are only covered when children are very young. Large gaps are left between, say, the Tudors and the Second World War.

Knowledge of history is essential for a democracy.

History shapes our national identity, helps us learn lessons, analyse problems and make better decisions. In doing so, it is vital equipment enabling voters in democracies to be better citizens.

History should be mandatory until the age of 16

This would bring England in line with the rest of the world, expand the opportunities for greater depth and interest in the curriculum and ensure every child has the chance to develop the knowledge to be an effective and active citizen.