



# Wise in 5: History in Schools

Wise in 5 is a snapshot comparative guide to a public policy issue across the nations of the UK and Ireland. It helps you be PolicyWISE (Wales, Ireland, Scotland, England) in 5 (it takes just five minutes to read).

This briefing was published February 2026. It includes a summary of the latest policy developments across the nations, as well as related research from PolicyWISE, The Open University and PolicyWISE's university partners.

PolicyWISE creates neutral and constructive spaces for policy professionals and academics across the nations to develop relationships, respect and knowledge. We support and nurture a common culture of developing and sharing insight, knowledge, ideas and context from across the nations in a comparative and collaborative way.



	Curriculum last updated	Age history is compulsory until	Curriculum category	Outcomes based or content based?
England	2014	14 years old	History	Content
Northern Ireland	2007	14 years old	Environment and Society	Outcomes
Republic of Ireland	2018	11 years old	History	Outcomes
Scotland	2011	14 years old	Social Studies	Outcomes
Wales	2022	16 years old*	Humanities	Outcomes

\* As part of the broader Humanities 'area of learning & experience' students will study History until the Age of 16, but do not have to take a GCSE on the subject unless they have elected to do so.

# Wise in 5: History in Schools

## Overview

Our history lessons are never just a straightforward account of the past. They are based on carefully constructed ideas which shape our sense of who we are and how we understand our place in the world. Education is a devolved matter and the way that history is taught varies significantly across the UK and Ireland. These differences are not just technical quirks of curriculum design – they reflect deeper questions about national identity, belonging, and the stories we choose to tell. This Wise in 5 briefing compares how history is positioned in the curricula, focusing on the period of secondary school immediately following primary education but typically preceding formal examinations.

## The place of Britain in English, Scottish and Welsh history curriculums

The choices policymakers make today will shape how tomorrow's citizens understand themselves and the people around them. Across the five nations, how each system positions itself in relation to its neighbours within the Atlantic archipelago of the United Kingdom and Ireland varies considerably. England's curriculum is the only one to centre British history as a coherent narrative, with statutory content organised around developments in Britain from the medieval period to the present, rather than framing the past explicitly through a UK or English lens. Wales and Scotland place national identity and belonging at the heart of their frameworks, embedding historical learning within cynefin or national heritage rather than a British narrative. While England has traditionally stood apart in its emphasis on British history, recent curriculum reform proposals signal a growing interest in local histories and more diverse narratives, suggesting a rebalancing of how the past is framed for future learners.

## History and identity on the island of Ireland

Northern Ireland's curriculum occupies a distinct position again: it encourages exploration of local, national, and island-wide histories shaped by conflict, community, and identity, with pupils engaging both with the history of Northern Ireland and with wider histories of Ireland, Britain, and the world. Ireland's junior cycle foregrounds Irish history within European and global contexts, with the histories of Britain and Northern Ireland appearing where relevant but not forming the structural backbone of the curriculum.

## A challenge and an opportunity

As with other policy areas, divergence across the five jurisdictions can be both a strength and a challenge. It allows for innovation and responsiveness to local contexts, though this also needs to be negotiated within nations as well as across the UK.





# Nation by Nation

## England

England's national curriculum is the responsibility of the Westminster government. It was last revised in 2014, and is on the cusp of change, with a review of the national curriculum **published** in November 2025. The contents of English history textbooks has previously generated lively **debate**, and the proposed changes to the new curriculum look **set to do the same**. The 2025 Curriculum and Assessment Review final report contained recommendations to make England's history curriculum more reflective of Britain's diverse communities and to include a focus on local history in different areas. It also recommends further clarity about what content is and is not statutory in the curriculum, supporting teachers to decide which elements to treat in depth.

The national curriculum is mandatory for maintained (council-run) schools, but academies and free schools – which make up around **80% of state secondary schools** – have more freedom and are not legally required to follow it all. The same goes for independent schools, where **7% of English school children** are educated. However, in July 2024, the Education Secretary **announced** that the Department for Education will 'make legislative changes so that all state schools, including academies, will be required to teach the national curriculum'. In England, history is compulsory until the end of Key Stage 3 (around the age of 14).

The national curriculum in England as it currently stands **outlines** the following as content for a key stage three history syllabus which extends and deepens students' understanding of 'British, local and world history' (highlighted in bold is the statutory content):

- The development of Church, state and society in Medieval Britain 1066–1509, e.g. the Norman Conquest, Christendom and the Crusades, the English campaign to conquer Scotland and Wales
- The development of Church, state and society in Britain 1509–1745, e.g. the Elizabethan religious settlement, the first colony in America and first contact with India, the Act of Union 1707.
- Ideas, political power, industry and empire: Britain, 1745–1901, e.g. Britain's transatlantic slave trade, French Revolutionary wars, Ireland and Home Rule, British Empire
- Challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world 1901 to present day, including The Holocaust and e.g. WWI and WWII, inter-war years, creation of the welfare state, end of Empire

- A local history study,
- The study of an aspect or theme in British history that consolidates and extends pupils' chronological knowledge from before 1066,
- A significant society or issue in world history and its interconnections with other world developments, e.g. Mughal India 1526–1857, China's Qing dynasty 1644–1911, Russian empires c.1800–1989, 20th century.

While academies and independent schools in England are not required to follow the national curriculum, they do appear to draw heavily on it. For example, at Oasis Community Learning – a trust which operates more than 50 schools – the key stage three **curriculum** closely follows the content outlined above.

## Wales

In 2022, Wales rolled out its new Curriculum for Wales, which places **cynefin** – a sense of place and belonging – at its heart. The new curriculum, which was designed to create '**ethical, informed citizens ready to be citizens of Wales and the world**', is statutory for all state-funded schools. State-funded schools are home to the **vast majority** of pupils in Wales – there are over 170,000 students in Welsh secondary schools, and only around 10,000 in independent schools. This means that, unlike in England, almost all of the schools in Wales are legally required to teach the national curriculum.

Under the Curriculum for Wales, history is compulsory for all pupils aged three to 16. It can be taught as a standalone subject, or as part of a Humanities context alongside, or integrated with, Geography, RVE (Religion, Values and Ethics), Social Studies, and Business Studies. Schools are required to follow broad learning targets and outcomes, but content is not mandated.

The Department for Education has a number of **resources** for history teaching on its website which are primarily focused on Welsh places, people, and communities over the years. The Hachette textbook created for Curriculum for Wales History teaching for 11–14-year-olds revolves around the '**changing history of the people of Wales over approximately the last 1000 years**' in a global context. It suggests the following as some of the central questions for students to focus their studies on:

# Nation by Nation

- Why was the rule of England so important for Wales?
- How much did the lives of people in Wales change, and how important was religion, between the 11th and 19th centuries?
- What were the most important features of the Islamic civilisations of the 7th and 8th centuries?
- How much did the Industrial Revolution change people's lives?
- Why was the transatlantic slave trade significant?
- How should we remember the British Empire?
- To what extent has Wales become a multicultural society in the last 1000 years?

## Scotland

Scotland's [Curriculum for Excellence](#) is designed by Education Scotland and is statutory for all state secondary schools. There are approximately [360 state-funded secondary schools in Scotland, and only 50-60 independent ones](#). Education Scotland has been undertaking a systematic review called the Curriculum Improvement Cycle, and in summer 2025 announced [plans](#) to reform the curriculum over the next few years.

The current Curriculum for Excellence emphasises critical thinking and flexibility, with history falling under its social studies curriculum area. As is the case in Wales, History can be taught as a standalone topic or as part of an integrated social studies curriculum.

Social studies, with history included, is compulsory until the end of Broad General Education at the end of Secondary 3 (around the age of 14). The Curriculum for Excellence does not prescribe exact historical topics. Instead, it sets out broad "Experiences and Outcomes" and "Benchmarks", which are broad and skill-focused (for example, being able to use primary and secondary sources selectively), for [Social Studies](#). Looking across several Scottish secondary schools, the following topics are studied within curriculums for students in S1, S2, and S3<sup>1</sup>:

- The Iron Age in Scotland
- Witchcraft in 16th and 17th Scotland
- The last Kings of Scotland, and the reign of Mary Queen of Scots
- The Atlantic Slave Trade

- The First World War, The Second World War, and the Holocaust
- The Cold War
- American history, including the civil rights movement
- The Industrial Revolution in Britain

## Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland history teaching often navigates contested narratives of conflict, community, and identity. The curriculum encourages multiple perspectives, but implementation is [politically sensitive](#). The current curriculum was initiated in 2007, but change is on the horizon following the publication in summer 2025 of a [curriculum review](#) calling for a new purpose-led and knowledge-rich approach.

Children aged four to 16 in grant-aided schools (there are only handful of non-state secondary schools in Northern Ireland) must follow the [curriculum](#). The post-primary curriculum at Key Stage 3 is structured around broad themes, including language and literacy, mathematics and numeracy, arts, modern languages and environment and society. Religious education is a compulsory part of the Northern Ireland curriculum for all key stages.

History (and Geography) is taught within the environment and society area of the curriculum. Rather than setting out exact historical topics, it is structured around [broad statutory guidelines](#) which should be covered through a 'broad and balanced range' of 'historical period', 'Irish, British, European and global contexts', 'significant political, social, economic, cultural and religious development'. At Key Stage 3 these states that pupils should:

- Investigate the past and different interpretations of history, develop chronological awareness, and use historical sources
- Explore key aspects of local, national, and international history, including: the impact of conflict, colonisation, and migration; political, economic, and social change; the role of individuals and groups in shaping history

The History Teachers Association Northern Ireland's [suggests](#) the following topics for KS3: US Civil Rights, the Plantation of Ulster, the Normans, and the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

<sup>1</sup> These examples are drawn from: [BGE S1-S3 Curriculum - Linlithgow Academy](#); [BGE History - Dumfries Academy](#); [S1 History Course Plan - Breadalbane Academy](#)

# Nation by Nation

## Republic of Ireland

In the Republic of Ireland a [new specification](#) was introduced in 2018, focusing on three strands: the Nature of History, the History of Ireland, and the History of Europe and the Wider World. Unlike in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and England, history is not compulsory at the junior cycle stage (ages 12–15/16). The only compulsory subjects are Irish, English, and Mathematics. The new curriculum is compulsory in all state-funded post-primary schools (with only a small minority of students attending fee-paying schools in the country).

While it is tricky to find an exact number of students who chose to study history at junior cycle in the Republic of Ireland, state examination statistics show that the vast majority of students elect to study the subject in the three-years post-primary education<sup>2</sup>

The junior cycle History [curriculum](#) is structured around various statements of learning – for example that the student can interpret a wide

range of texts, and appreciates diverse values, beliefs, and traditions. The curriculum suggests, but does not prescribe, relevant learning content, including:

- Interviewing older people about religious practices and traditions
- The lives of ordinary people under different systems of government, such as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union
- Why certain historical events are commemorated, such as Holocaust
- Investigating the roots of contemporary issues, e.g. the impact of the Crusades on the modern world
- Migration or population change, e.g. as caused by the Black Death, or how it has affected identity on the island of Ireland
- The 1916 Rising and the events that led to the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921.

## Wise up – 5 policy points to take away

Five key points from what we've learnt above, which could be considered as part of further policy development and delivery in any or all of the nations.

1. History is compulsory in different ways across each nation. England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland require that history is studied until 14, while Wales extends this until 16 (though students do not have to be formally examined on the subject). Ireland stands apart, history is not compulsory at secondary school (though it appears that most students still choose to study it).
2. Most nations favour outcomes-based frameworks, with Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Ireland focusing on skills, concepts, and broad learning outcomes, giving schools flexibility in topic selection. England is the exception, prescribing historical content as part of its key stage three curriculum.
3. There is a growing emphasis on diversity and global perspectives. All nations show increasing awareness of the importance of inclusive histories – including for the teaching of empire, migration, and slavery. All also encourage students to explore local, national, and global interconnections.
4. Curriculum designs reflect national narratives – with curricula more shaped around the local and ideas of belonging, identity and citizenship in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Ireland, and in England content is more geared towards ideas of Britishness rather than England-specifically. This looks set to shift with the latest curriculum review for England calling for more local histories to be taught in the classroom.
5. Devolution allows for innovation and responsiveness to local contexts but could also create complexity for cross-border understanding. More comparative policy research could help bridge any gaps and encourage collaboration between educators across different nations.





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The Open University has been awarded £1m in funding from Dangoor Education to establish and run PolicyWISE. The funding has supported the launch of PolicyWISE in 2023 and our development over the following four years.



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#### Wise in 5

The only regular snapshot comparative guide to public policy issues across the nations of the UK and Ireland.

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**Dewi Knight, Director**

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