

St. Elphin's School

History

MAY 1989

THE OLD WAY

For some people, learning about the way things were is fascinating in itself, but by the 1960s, history had become a markedly unpopular subject with young people. It seemed to be stuck in a "1066 And All That" mould, with fixed judgments to be learned about people and things: Richard III was a Bad King - the New Poor Law was a Good Thing - and a vast mass of not understood facts to be memorized. Small wonder, then, that Scripture and History were written off as the most boring and irrelevant subjects by a survey of school leavers in 1969.

RECENT CHANGES

So there have been changes in the way history is being done in schools:

- * The main emphasis has shifted away from Kings and Queens to "What was it like for ordinary people?"
- * More recent history is studied.
Gone are the days when history finished thirty years ago.
- * Instead of pre-digested judgments, children are encouraged to use documents and pictures to form conclusions.

GCSE

GCSE has three syllabuses reflecting these trends in varying ways. We do British Social and Economic History, which covers the first two trends.

GCSE's options run up to 1980. Instead of the contortions of politicians and the foibles of kings, we concentrate on the things that affect people's everyday lives, their jobs and what they spend their money on.

So, there have been big changes in what sort of history we study. These developments have not yet been so marked at the middle school level, because the publishers of textbooks have been slow to respond. The trouble is that historical skills need understanding and understanding is based on factual knowledge. In practice, the girl who says "I don't understand" usually means "I don't remember".

TEXT ON DISK

Both our main A level notes and our GCSE text have been put onto word-processor disk. This means that extra source material, GCSE questions and revised opinions can be quickly incorporated and printed for class use. It is hoped that a middle school set of texts can be put onto disk by next September.

PROBLEMS

It was the original idea in GCSE to cut the amount of memory work and to concentrate on historical skills, but in practice the new examination has turned out to be largely a test of knowledge. There is a running skirmish between teachers and examiners which promises to reduce the amount of factual content in the syllabus.

Another problem is that some people don't like the new ways. Both social history and twentieth century world history are seen by them as political indoctrination. They would like teachers to return to the "Thank God I'm English" history of the national heritage sort.

EMPATHY

Other people complain about what is called for no good reason "empathy". This is a type of exercise which requires that you record what was important to particular groups of historical characters, what made them act as they did. It is a way of finding out if pupils know enough about them to do this. In no way is it meant to be just an exercise in imagination.

'A' LEVEL AND GCSE

Advanced Level Social and Economic History has probably been the first subject to be adapted to the changed demands of post-GCSE courses. The syllabus has been deliberately planned as a continuation of the GCSE approach with much more emphasis on social history and twentieth century developments, using documents and sources as the main material. It has become de rigueur to stress that all judgments are partial and all historians biased.

THE SPRING

But history can still be fun for those elephants' children with a 'satiabile curiosity' to know what it was like to be alive THEN.