# Fewer than one in five UK schools teach key battles like Trafalgar and Waterloo, report finds



A recent study by Policy Exchange has revealed concerning trends in the teaching of British history in schools, particularly regarding the focus on pivotal historical events such as the Battles of Agincourt, Trafalgar, and Waterloo. The report highlights that fewer than one in five secondary schools engage students with these significant moments, raising questions about the comprehensiveness of the current curriculum.

As it stands, the research indicates that only 11 per cent of UK secondary schools acquaint students with the Battles of Trafalgar and Waterloo, two events that were instrumental in shaping the British Empire. The Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 solidified Britain’s naval supremacy, while the 1815 Battle of Waterloo marked a decisive end to the Napoleonic Wars. In stark contrast, nearly universal coverage exists for topics like the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the First World War, suggesting an imbalance in how British historical narratives are constructed and presented.

The report found that a mere 18 per cent of students learn about the Battle of Agincourt, another critical battle that enhanced Henry V’s reputation as one of England’s great kings. Such statistics reflect an increasingly 'diversified' syllabus which emerged following governmental directives aimed at incorporating a broader view of historical topics, particularly those associated with 'cultural change'.

This shift, initiated under the Conservative government, aimed to encourage a richer historical education for children aged 11 to 14, moving away from a curriculum predominantly focused on preparing students for GCSEs. Notably, the findings underscore a curriculum that favours narratives of cultural and social significance over vital military achievements.

Former Secretary of State for Education, Nadhim Zahawi, commented on the study, noting that while it marks progress towards a knowledge-rich historical education, it is disappointing to see inspiring moments in English history relegated to the background. His sentiments echo the concerns of other educators, such as Chris McGovern, who argue that history should not serve merely as a platform for social critique. McGovern expressed apprehension that this curricular direction might undermine British national identity, suggesting that history is being interpreted through a lens more aligned with contemporary agendas than with an unbiased recounting of the past.

The report also revealed that students’ engagement with history remains superficial, relying heavily on media portrayals rather than academically rigorous sources. A striking 53 per cent of individuals cite film and television as primary sources of their historical knowledge, while only a modest 12 per cent turn to newspapers and news media outlets.

In response to these concerns, the report advocates for a comprehensive British history qualification for 16-year-olds that would encompass a broader timeline from 1066 to 1989. Such an approach is supported by findings from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on History and Archives, which emphasises the need for a structured curriculum that presents a coherent narrative of the nation's past, rather than an episodic, fragmented overview.

Moreover, insights gathered from recent studies indicate that the inclusion of key events in the curriculum is frequently at the discretion of individual teachers, whose choices may inadvertently reflect a preference for current educational trends over established historical significances. Ensuring a balanced curriculum that respects both the richness of British heritage and the diverse experiences of its people presents a considerable challenge for educators.

As discussions surrounding the curriculum continue, the imperative remains: to cultivate a more thorough understanding of British history among students, ensuring they are equipped not only with knowledge of pivotal cultural events but also with a well-rounded comprehension of the historical contexts that have shaped the nation.

### Reference Map

* Paragraph 1: [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14726789/What-British-children-REALLY-taught-school-Transatlantic-slavery-studied-topic-UK-history-lessons-one-10-students-learning-Trafalgar-Waterloo.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
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* Paragraph 3: [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14726789/What-British-children-REALLY-taught-school-Transatlantic-slavery-studied-topic-UK-history-lessons-one-10-students-learning-Trafalgar-Waterloo.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-history/rich-encounters-with-the-past-history-subject-report)
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## Bibliography

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2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-history/rich-encounters-with-the-past-history-subject-report> - The UK government's 'Rich Encounters with the Past: History Subject Report' evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of history teaching in schools. It highlights that while pupils are taught about the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the First World War, there is a lack of coverage on other significant historical events, such as the Battles of Agincourt, Trafalgar, and Waterloo. The report emphasizes the need for a more comprehensive and chronological approach to teaching British history to ensure students gain a well-rounded understanding of the past.
3. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-20646622> - A report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on History and Archives calls for an overhaul of school history lessons and the introduction of a British history qualification for 16-year-olds. The report criticizes the current curriculum for its episodic nature and insufficient coverage of key historical events, including the Battles of Agincourt, Trafalgar, and Waterloo. It advocates for a more chronological and comprehensive approach to teaching British history to provide students with a coherent understanding of the nation's past.
4. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02680939.2024.2357614> - The article 'History teachers as curriculum-makers in policy and practice: quantitative insights from England and Scotland' examines the role of history teachers in shaping the curriculum. It discusses how teachers' decisions impact the inclusion of topics like the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the First World War, while events such as the Battles of Agincourt, Trafalgar, and Waterloo may be underrepresented. The study highlights the need for teachers to balance policy directives with the diverse historical interests of students.
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