SS Peter & Paul Catholic Primary School

History Threshold Concepts

The big ideas that unlock historical thinking · 2026–27

A threshold concept is an idea that changes how a pupil sees the subject once they grasp it — and which they cannot easily un-learn. Our curriculum returns to five of them again and again, at increasing depth, through three golden threads.

The three golden threads

Thread	What it means
Innovation and Change	Human creativity and problem-solving have transformed society in every period studied — from the wheel to the digital revolution. Pupils trace steam power, flight, Roman engineering, Viking shipbuilding, Tudor navigation and Bletchley Park, and in Year 6 confront innovation at its darkest in industrial genocide.
Everyday Life	History is not only kings and battles. Pupils investigate how ordinary people lived across different times, places, social classes and cultures — Victorian nurses, Iron Age hillfort communities, thane and ceorl, Benin craftspeople, evacuees in the Blitz — developing empathy and the habit of seeing more than one perspective.
Power and Leadership	Who holds power, how do they get it, and what happens when they abuse it? Introduced in Year 3 with the Egyptian pharaoh and Roman emperor, the thread runs through Alfred the Great, the Oba of Benin, Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, to Year 6 and the contrast between Athenian democracy, Guy Fawkes's violent challenge to Parliament and Churchill's democratic defeat in 1945.

The five threshold concepts

Concept	In Key Stage 1 this looks like	By Year 6 this looks like
Chronology	Using 'past', 'present', 'before' and 'after' correctly, and ordering a few events on a simple timeline.	Navigating the entire sweep of history studied with confidence — making simultaneous history comparisons and tracing long-term change from prehistory to the mid-twentieth century.
Change and Continuity	Noticing one way life was different in the past, and one way it has stayed the same.	Distinguishing slow, gradual change from dramatic rupture — and asking why some things changed faster than others.
Similarity and Difference	Comparing toys, holidays or transport then and now.	Comparing civilisations across continents and centuries, always asking: similar to whom? Different for whom?
Evidence and Interpretation	Handling artefacts and photographs, and beginning to understand that someone made them for a reason.	Corroborating sources against one another, and evaluating evidence produced under duress or for propaganda — understanding that historical knowledge is constructed, contested and incomplete.
Historical Significance	Naming a significant individual and explaining one reason why they are remembered.	Understanding that significance is not fixed but changes as perspectives change — and that labels such as 'terrorist', 'great' and 'primitive' are politically constructed.

Two frameworks that recur

Substantive and disciplinary knowledge

Every unit teaches both. Substantive knowledge is what happened — the periods, people, events and societies. Disciplinary knowledge is how we know — chronology, source work, interpretation and significance. Where the two meet is historical

understanding, and that is what we assess.

Pupils are taught explicitly that knowing the story of the Great Fire is not the same as knowing why we believe it — and that a historian needs both.

The judgement question

Introduced in Year 4 with ‘Did Alfred deserve the title the Great?’ and reused in every unit thereafter, pupils are asked to reach a judgement, support it with evidence, and acknowledge the strongest argument against them.

By Year 6 this is second nature: pupils construct, deliver and defend a historical argument in a formal debate, and can express a moral commitment arising from historical study — Never Again as a historically grounded position rather than a slogan.
