

The world at our feet: a history of shoes

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Key Stage 2 – a study of an aspect or theme in British history that extends pupils' chronological knowledge beyond 1066

Do you ever stop to think about the history of the shoes on your feet?

From the moment we start to walk, shoes become an ever-present part of our daily life, protecting our feet from damage, moisture, heat and cold, expressing our personality and fashion tastes and enabling us to carry out a variety of activities both safely and effectively. Shoes are an essential part of our lives and a focus on this ubiquitous everyday artefact can be used to help children make direct comparisons to the past as well as enabling the exploration of historical themes through a cross-curricular approach.

National Curriculum links

Purpose of study – ‘inspire pupils’ curiosity to know more about the past ... understand the process of change, the diversity of societies ...’

Aims – ‘understand historical concepts such as continuity and change, cause and consequence, similarity, difference and significance ... make connections, draw contrasts, analyse trends ...’

Key Stage 2 subject content – 'Pupils should ... establish clear narratives within and across the periods they study ... note connections, contrasts and trends over time and develop the appropriate use of historical

terms... address questions about change, cause, similarity and difference, and significance.'

How old are the earliest shoes?

It seems likely that from the earliest times we have needed to protect our feet and have fashioned footwear from whatever materials were easily available, whether that be animal skins, woven grasses or bark. The earliest known examples of human footwear are the bark sandals dating to c.8500–7000 BCE while the earliest leather shoe probably dates to around 3000 BCE and was found in Armenia. It is likely however that humankind was manufacturing and wearing footwear for many thousands of years before this.

In hot countries such as Egypt this developed into the sandal with a sole made from woven papyrus and attached to the foot with toe loops. Similar sandals have been found in Japan, Polynesia and the Americas. As few early shoes survive, we do not know much about prehistoric footwear in Britain – it is not until the Roman period that we see more shoes surviving in the archaeological record. The standard Roman footwear was still the sandal, now fashioned from leather with an upper covering some or all of the foot. The military sandal, the caliga, exposed the toes, but had a lattice-patterned upper, front lacing and a heavily nailed sole but other styles such as the calceus and the gallica had

Activity 1 – Shoes now and then

National Curriculum links – ‘note connections, contrasts and trends over time ... devise historically valid questions about change, cause, similarity and difference, and significance ... understand how our knowledge of the past is constructed from a range of sources’.

Starting with a focus on shoes worn today pupils can, through focused enquiry questions, develop an understanding of shoe characteristics, materials and manufacture. This understanding and investigative method can then be applied to an investigation of historical shoes.

Questions to explore include:

- What materials are they made from? – leather (skins – cow, pig, snakeskin, crocodile), fabrics, synthetic leathers, plastics, wood (clogs), threads, think about hidden parts, e.g. metal pegs in heels, cardboard inner soles.
- How are they constructed? – 3D forms from 2D components, functionality vs fashion, attachment or joining methods e.g. stitching, glue, staples, tacks.
- How are they fastened or secured to the feet? – buckles, laces, Velcro, buttons, slip-on, straps.
- What are the main features/parts? The sole, heel, upper, tongue, toe, fastenings, decorative elements, what is their purpose?
- How were they made? – by hand, by machine, at home / in factories, this country, other countries?

- How available or accessible are they to people? – cost, standard sizes, suitability, shops, made locally, supply chains.
- What is their purpose? – functional, specific (e.g. sports), fashionable combination?

With a good understanding of shoe manufacture, materials and styles, pupils can then compare modern shoes to those worn by people in different periods in the past – considering the differences and similarities and changes over time – for example leather not plastic, handmade, different fashions/styles, laces not Velcro etc.

Using examples of historical shoes from different periods, pupils can create a timeline highlighting how fashions, shoemaking methods and materials have changed over time.

Northampton Museum and Art Gallery has a large shoe collection of international importance and a varied selection of images is available via their website www.northamptonmuseums.com

a closed toe which was much better for the British weather!

Medieval fashion – the first footwear worn for style and status not practicality

The departure of the Romans saw a shift to the production and wearing of shoes rather than sandals: footwear with an oval or pointed toe that enclosed the whole foot. Sometimes referred to as turn shoes, they were made by stitching the leather sole to the upper (itself constructed from sewn together pieces of leather) and then turned inside out to wear. A slit might be made in the upper to allow the foot to fit in and then laced to secure it on the foot. This style of footwear, sometimes low cut, sometimes more like an ankle boot, remained the staple footwear style for many centuries.

By the fourteenth century, footwear styles began to reflect more fashion than practical qualities – at least for the king and his courtiers. The pointed toe grew

longer and longer, its length becoming an indication of wealth and status. Eventually the king felt forced to intervene and in 1463 a law was passed banning any points more than two inches past the toe and a more blocky or square toed shoe became the norm.

However, fashion soon took over again and toes up to 6½ inches wide became commonplace. Known as foot bags, these too were soon banned, and gradually blunt-pointed and round-toed shoes returned.

All change – sixteenth to eighteenth century development including heels, buckles and the start of gender-specific styles

The next development in shoe design, was the introduction of the heel. By the end of Elizabeth I's reign heels could be up to three inches in height and footwear was now generally made as a straight – that is with no shaping for separate right and left shoes, while longer boots, reaching up to the knee, also became popular, and were often very decorative.

Activity 2 – Walking in their shoes

National Curriculum links – ‘... establish clear narratives within and across the periods ... note connections, contrasts and trends over time ... address and devise historically valid questions about change, cause, similarity and difference, and significance ... construct informed responses that involve thoughtful selection and organisation of relevant historical information’.

What people wear is an important aspect of social and economic history and footwear can be used to further explore the culture and society of a particular period – from the use of materials, manufacturing and trade to the role of fashion and status in society.

A shoe from a particular period could be used as a starting point for pupils to consider what it tells us about the person who wore it and their way of life. By taking a walk in their shoes and finding out about the life and events, the wearer would have experienced, pupils can make direct connections with the lives of people from the past.

For example, pupils can investigate a Roman hobnailed sandal or caliga and compare it to modern shoes. It is made of leather and doesn't fully cover the foot and has metal studs on the sole. By comparing it to modern equivalents (metal strips on soles/heels to prevent wear, or studs on football boots / running spikes for traction) they can develop an understanding that this style of sandal was worn by soldiers who needed long lasting footwear for walking or marching long distances on roads made of stone. Pupils might then further investigate the role and life of a Roman soldier in Britain and walking in their shoes gain some insight into what life was like for them.

Activity 3 – Walking in their shoes – an alternative approach

National Curriculum links – ‘... note connections, contrasts and trends over time... construct informed responses that involve thoughtful selection and organisation of relevant historical information ... understand how our knowledge of the past is constructed from a range of sources.’

An alternative approach to exploring the use of shoes as an historical source could be to provide pupils with a selection of shoes (images) and ask them to research and then write the story of its wearer (age, sex, job, status, lifestyle etc.) and ask them what evidence they can point to for their

story. This could be further extended by focusing on two different shoes from the same period – for instance a highly decorated medieval poulaine compared with a turn shoe with a wooden patten to emphasise the different life experiences of people in the past, depending on social status.

In the seventeenth century, men wore shoes and mules (shoes that enclosed the toe but were backless) with a square toe and heels, while it was considered that a pointed toe was more feminine and suitable for women. The mid-1600s also saw the introduction of the buckle for fastening – first for men and then women. Buckles quickly replaced the ribbon lacing that had been the standard method for securing the shoe to the foot for the wealthy. These shoes, worn by men and women, were very elaborate, using brightly coloured fabrics, embroidery and gemstones.

At the start of the eighteenth century, although women's shoes continued to match their elaborate dresses, men's shoes became plainer – made of black leather with pointed toes and low heels.

Nineteenth century – simple designs, factories and mass production

By the beginning of the nineteenth century women's shoes too became simpler – heels disappeared and pointed toes were replaced by dainty satin and silk shoes with narrow oval and then square toes fastened with ribbon ties. Left and right shoes also re-emerged at this time.



For practical use, boots dominated both men and women's footwear, with the development of a range of styles and introducing the use of elastic sides and buttons to assist with fitting. Women also wore shoes in the style of court shoes, in a variety of different materials, from satin and silk to reptile and decorated leathers while men had the laced Oxford or Derby shoe.

By the end of the 1800s the introduction of mechanised shoe manufacturing and factories meant that a range of different leather shoes or boots were more readily available for the wider population.

Modern times – an explosion in fashion, design, materials and purpose-specific footwear

With the arrival of the twentieth century the variety of shoe styles increased dramatically with the availability of coloured shoes, the return of the sandal, the availability of shoes for sport such as football or ice-skating, and the use of new material such as cork, fake leather and canvas.

With the rise of the shoe designer came the introduction of more fashion-led shoes from 1920s bar shoes to 1930s two-colour shoes to 1940s utility styles to 1950s brothel creepers to 1960s winklepickers and stiletto heels to 1970s platform soles and of course the sneaker or trainer, once worn for sport but now the ubiquitous form of footwear for young and old alike.

Increasing mass production and a move to overseas manufacturing along with cheaper materials and manufacturing methods means the range of shoes available today – from designer Jimmy Choo's, handmade men's brogues or high-street fashion brands – has never been greater.

What better time to stop and reflect upon the development of shoes over time and recognise that shoe manufacture, materials and fashion reflects both the different times and societies that wore them?

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Resources

Websites

Northampton Museum and Art Gallery has large collections. As well as offering school sessions and loan boxes the website

www.northamptonmuseums.com has lots of useful information about the history of shoes as well as links to many high-quality images of historic shoes in the collection.

The Victoria and Albert Museum has an extensive footwear collection and has an interactive 'History of Shoes' with many excellent images of footwear from different periods and different cultures –

www.vam.ac.uk/shoestimeline

The British Footwear Association has an informative and easily digestible section on the history of fashion footwear

www.britishfootwearassociation.co.uk/history-of-shoe-fashion

Books

Shoes: an illustrated history (2014)

by Rebecca Shawcross

Shoes: the complete sourcebook (2005)

John Peacock

Shoes: a history from sandals to sneakers (2011)

by Giorgio Riello and Peter McNeil

Artefacts / handling collections

Pupils could investigate their own shoes, or a school collection containing a range of types and styles of footwear could be created using donated shoes from parents, staff and the community or purchased cheaply from charity shops.

You may be able to purchase or borrow replica shoes, or local museums or other heritage organisations may have handling collections that may be loaned to schools. Alternatively pupils could easily use images depicting period shoes – good-quality images are readily available on many websites.

Replica historical shoes from different historical periods are also increasingly available for purchase and are available online – alternatively you may have a re-enactment group nearby who will be willing to loan examples of footwear to schools.

It would also be useful to have examples of deconstructed shoes – cut in half to reveal the hidden parts of a shoe or methods of construction – this can be done relatively easily using a chop saw or saw table.

Footwear timeline

Roman – 43–410 CE

Roman sandal

This Roman 'gladiator'-style sandal would have had hobnails in the sole, making them suitable for military use. The hobnails could leave patterns of imprints in the ground. The openness of the straps let air circulate and kept the foot cool.



Prehistoric – 3000–300 BCE

The earliest example of a leather shoe dating to around 3000 BCE, found in Armenia. It is likely however that humankind had been manufacturing and wearing footwear from a variety of materials for many thousands of years before that date.



Tudor and Stuart 1485–1603

The Tudors turned to slip-on shoes fastened with a strap and buckle and a squared toe. Fashion and status saw the toe grow ever wider, sometimes stuffed with straw or wool. They became known as footbags, bear paw or cow's mouth shoes. The width of this shoe, dating to around 1540, is 11cm but during Henry VIII's reign shoes reached more than 17cm wide.



Medieval – 425–1536 CE

Medieval poulaine

A leather shoe with pointed toe was worn by both men and women from 1340 to around 1475 – but it was only men who wore styles with an exaggerated long-toed version. Such shoes were status symbols and were supposed to suggest the masculinity of the wearer. These are a replica pair made of leather.



17th century and 18th century

Dating to the 1660s this style of shoe called a latchet tie was a popular choice for women. In England heels with a distinct heel arch appeared on male and female shoes from the late 1590s onwards. These shoes have blue velvet uppers embroidered with floral motifs in silver gilt thread and the heel is carved wood covered with leather.



Slip-on shoes or slippers

From the start of the 1800s the heel gradually disappeared from women's footwear. By the 1840s the typical ladies' shoe was a simple, flat-soled, square slip-on shoe with a ribbon tie to help keep it on the foot. These satin and leather shoes were made in Paris in 1827.



Victorian – 1837–1901

Queen Victoria made wearing boots acceptable for women of all social classes and from the 1830s boots became widespread for men, women and children at all levels of society. This button boot was a classic style worn by women and children across all social classes. It dates to 1860.



This men's Derby boot dates from the late 1800s and is a classic men's style with a laced open front.



20th century

1930s

Two-tone colour shoes for men became very popular in the 1920s. Somewhat flashy in style, they were often worn to sporting events in America and became known as 'Spectator' shoes. These Oxford style two-tone men's shoes date from the early 1930s.



1960s

The 'winklepicker' of the 1960s had a distinctive pointed toe and was supposedly named after the sharp pin used to pry wrinkles from their shells. They have a marked resemblance to medieval poulaines with a heel.



1970s

A style that started life as a popular music glam rock fashion was soon adopted by the high street – platform soles could be attached to all styles of footwear from sandals to thigh-length boots. The platform could be made from many different materials including cork, crepe, rubber, textiles and wood. This platform Derby-style shoe was made in 1976.



1920s

The start of the twentieth century and the raising of hemlines for women's clothing saw the increasing popularity of bar shoes rather than boots as female footwear. With a heel and a thin strap fastened by a buckle or button, there were versions for day wear, evening wear and even playing sports. These plaited leather bar shoes date from the 1920s.



1950s

Dating to the early 1950s these 'brothel creepers' or 'beetle crushers' are made of leather and crepe rubber. The soft, thick soles were perfect for creeping silently away. They were very popular with 1950s Teddy Boys who felt the design echoed their Edwardian-style dress.



With a desire for bright and light design, reflecting the optimism of the 1950s following the war and rationing years, the modern stiletto heel was launched in 1953.



It was a moulded plastic heel with a steel pin down its length enabling high but slender heels. This pair of red silk court shoes with stiletto heels dates to 1959.

1980s

The aerobics and jogging crazes of the 1970s and 1980s saw the trainer rise to prominence. This classic Nike Air Jordan 1, first seen in 1985, was the style that helped to catapult Nike into a global superbrand. It was created for superstar basketball player Michael Jordan. Today sneakers or trainers come in myriad designs and are a ubiquitous form of footwear for both young and old.

