

The Roaring Twenties:

teaching a decade of change across Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2

Susie Townsend

This article explores how one topic can be used in different ways to support historical understanding at Key Stage 1 or Key Stage 2. The themes highlighted could link into possible golden threads to enable connections to be made across a school's curriculum. The 'Roaring Twenties' also provide a real opportunity for experiential learning and cross-curricular input.



Few decades have been given a nickname as vivid as *the Roaring Twenties* and no one is quite sure how the name evolved. There was a popular Humphrey Bogart film in 1939 called *the Roaring Twenties* so perhaps it originated from this? Or maybe it was a nod to the Roaring Forties, strong powerful winds in the southern hemisphere that occur between 40° and 50° latitude. Wherever the term derived from it was used as a reflection on the decade of change, optimism and upheaval that was to define the 1920s: an exciting era to explore, in different ways, at both Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2.

Key Stage 1 – individuals, events and themes

The 1920s can fit into the Key Stage 1 National Curriculum in two units: significant events both nationally and internationally and significant individuals. Usually one event or person is selected but why not look at events across the whole year of 1926 as a snapshot of one hundred years ago. The timeline below highlights just some of the events of that year.

Instead of history being in one block of teaching it could be drip fed throughout the year, maybe linked to the months that the events occurred in. Some events might be explored in a collapsed history day, or a morning. Others, such as Queen Elizabeth and David Attenborough, could be a comparison of iconic people and their impact and could be taught across a sequence of lessons. History is then woven into the school curriculum and children would discover not just interesting events and people but a context for the learning and a flavour of the 1920s through an exploration of one year. There are opportunities for diversity too. The death of Bessie Coleman in April 1926, Josephine Baker's success in France at the Folies Bergère as well as the birth of black jazz musician Miles Davis are some examples. It was also the year that Black History Month was first posited. Women such as Gertrude Bell, the archaeologist, reflect women taking part in a range of roles.

A glance at the 2026 timeline shows themes that might be explored in another Key Stage 1 unit – a theme within living memory. Communication is referenced with the first transatlantic telephone message and the introduction of red telephone boxes, and through the first television. Technological developments overlap but could also include the first liquid rocket, development of 'Talkies' in the film industry, and the Einstein refrigerator. Developments in transport or sport could also be themes that can be linked to events in 1926.

There are great cross curricular links to explore. Scott Fitzgerald referred to the 1920s as the Jazz Age. Through Miles Davis and Josephine Baker children could find out about music and dance. They will love the Charleston which Baker popularised and which originated from the Caribbean plantations. Coco Chanel invented the Little Black Dress in 1926 and there must be some role play so that they can dress up as flappers! There are opportunities too to explore literature, such as Winnie the Pooh and Mary Poppins, against the context of the 1920s. Claude Monet's death in December 1926 could lead to an exploration of impressionism and children creating their own art in the style.

The final outcome could be a presentation to parents, with children creating a small play or mime about each event/person that they have studied and a last act which shows that they have drawn some conclusions about what the year tells them about the 1920s.

There are events highlighted with an asterisk (see table opposite) that you are not likely to consider at Key Stage 1 but which could become part of a Key Stage 2 unit of work.



Key Stage 2 – Enquiry question: Were the 1920s 'roaring'?

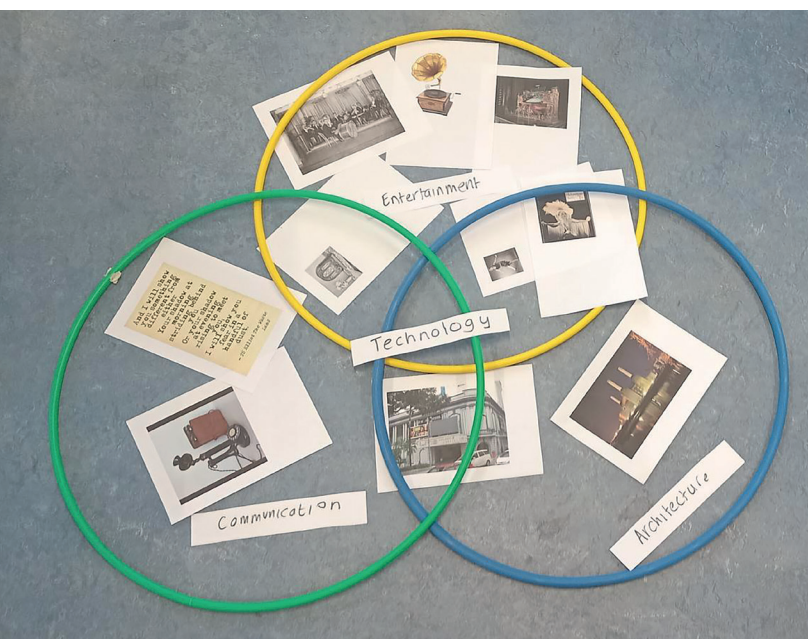
The 1920s could be explored at Key Stage 2 in the unit entitled 'a theme beyond 1066' and would provide excellent opportunities to engage children in key disciplinary knowledge – for example, by considering continuity and change, interpretation and causation.

Significance of events and developments, and their impact

One possible activity could be to create a bank of images of the 1920s showing the range of events, changes and people that framed the decade. Children could use hula hoops to represent different themes. They can then put the pictures in whichever hula hoop they think the picture connects to. They can move hoops to create Venn diagrams with images that they think intersect, see diagram on the following page. They need to justify their reasoning.

1926 timeline of events

January	Logie Baird demonstrated the first television
February	Red telephone boxes introduced
March	First transatlantic telephone call from New York to London First successful liquid fuel rocket
April	Death of Bessie Colman, aviator The future Queen Elizabeth II born Josephine Baker performed at Folies Bergère in Paris – popularised the Charleston Attempted assassination of Mussolini*
May	Birth of David Attenborough, naturalist Birth of Miles Davis, iconic jazz musician Polish government overthrown* General strike* Portuguese government overthrown*
June	Marilyn Monroe born
July	Death of Gertrude Bell, archaeologist
August	First British grand prix race at Brooklands First electric traffic lights in London* Gertrude Ederle, first woman to swim the English Channel
September	Attempted assassination of Mussolini*
October	A.A. Milne published <i>Winnie the Pooh</i> <i>Vogue</i> magazine introduces Coco Chanel's Little Black Dress
November	P.L. Travers writes a short story, <i>Mary Poppins</i> , which is published in New Zealand
December	Death of Claude Monet Hitler's book <i>Mein Kampf</i> published Lithuanian government overthrown Einstein refrigerator



Which aspect of life do they think developed the most during this period? Why do they think this was the case? The different labels of the themes could be put around the class and each pupil could stand in the classroom beside or between the themes they think developed the most and justify their position. You could take pictures of this which they could stick in their books and they could write their justification if you wanted to have a written response.

Characteristic features or sense of period

Each table could be given a different theme to investigate. This would help them develop their enquiry-based skills as they would need to decide the key questions that they want to ask in order to focus their research.

The outcome could be a presentation or an information market place. In this case an expert from each group teaches the rest of the class in a carousel and then those who have listened to the experts go back to their tables and teach the experts what they found out! Other outcomes could be to create a card game or board game to teach people about the 1920s and to help people recognise the impact of this decade.

Causation, chronology and continuity and change

The children cannot assess the changes that occurred in the decade if they do not consider why they happened and the context of the decade. In order to do this they need to look back to 1900–19. What was life like then? How different was it to the 1920s? Why? Again help the children to structure this enquiry and consider what questions they need to ask? What factor do they think was the most important reason for change, and why? Activities could include human timeline of events, source analysis and discussion. Strands to be developed are of course the impact of the war, changing class

views, desire for new life, reaction to horrors of war, changing status of women, technology that was developed for war supporting changes in 1920s.

The other view

Finally, to assess the key enquiry question they need to consider 'the other view'. Was it all positive change and progress? And did everyone benefit from the change? Four different pictures could be given to each table. What one sentence can they write that would sum up what these pictures tell them about the 1920s? This activity would end up with each table having a different view as they have had different sources of information. The events asterisked could be added to their timeline along with others in the latter part of the 1920s that show negative change or that life for everyone was not the same.

A class debate would help assess how children's understanding had developed and at the end each child could grade out of 10 how much they felt the 1920s 'roared'.

The teacher could then add the final piece of the jigsaw puzzle – what happened next. The children could identify events in the 1920s that foreshadowed what was to come in the 1930s. The asterisked events would help them here. Will they change their grading? What was the short-term and long-term impact of the 1920s?

The 1920s can be explored at so many different levels and there is so much that children can learn using this decade as a focus. The level of critical thinking that is required can lead to real challenge, but a study of this period can be accessed in a range of ways in order to support individual needs. Have fun with it!

Susie Townsend is a senior lecturer in History Education at the University of Roehampton.



Further reading

Reading recommendation for teachers

Article by Historic UK

www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/The-1920s-in-Britain/

History Extra

www.historyextra.com/period/20th-century/roaring-twenties-myth-britain-british-history-1920s-interwar-why-important/

Useful resources to show the different 'views' of the 1920s

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/twenties-britain-part-one/