

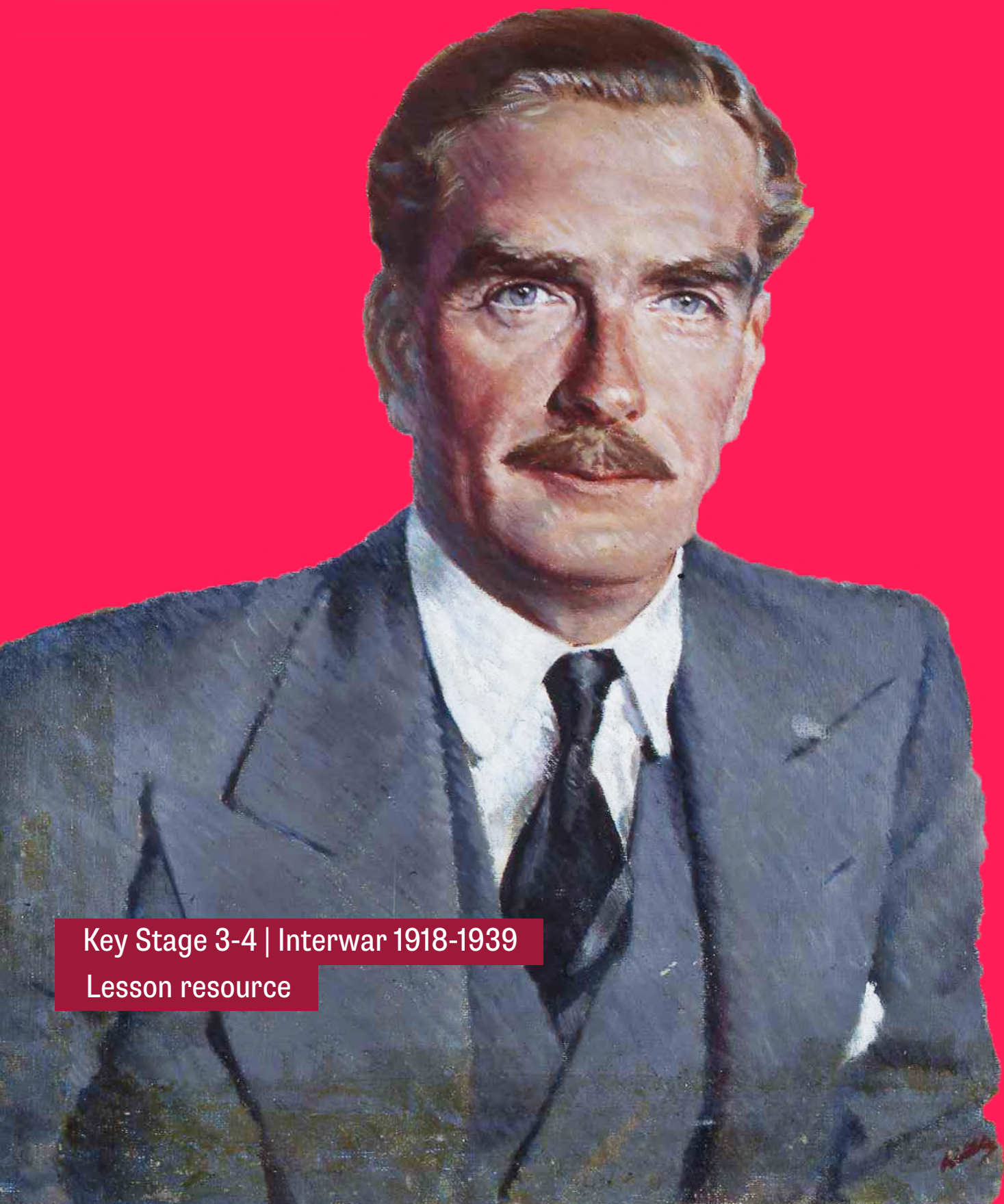
THE

NATIONAL

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Eden's last stand

Why did Anthony Eden resign in 1938?



Key Stage 3-4 | Interwar 1918-1939

Lesson resource

Introduction

By March 1936 Germany had already re-occupied the Rhineland against the terms of the Treaty of Versailles and Locarno Pacts. Italy and Germany had also formed the Rome-Berlin Axis in October 1936 which meant that Mussolini and Hitler had promised to support each other in event of war.

A month later Germany and Japan had signed the Anti-Comintern Pact directed against the Soviet Union. Italy left the League of Nations in 1937 and joined the Anti-Comintern Pact in the same year.

Use the documents in this lesson and to find out about differences between British politicians in the Conservative Government over foreign policy before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Suitable for:

KS 3-4

Time period:

Interwar 1918-1939

Connections to the Curriculum:

Key stage 3:

Challenges for Britain, Europe and the wider world 1901 to the present day: the inter-war years: the Great Depression and the rise of dictators

Key stage 4:

AQA GCSE History:
Germany, 1890–1945:
Democracy and dictatorship
Edexcel GCSE History:
c1900–present: Warfare and British society in modern era
OCR GCSE History: War and British Society c.790 to c.2010; attitudes and responses to war

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Teachers' notes

In this lesson students start by looking at two letters from Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden to Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. They relate to a period of mounting international tension during the winter of 1937-1938 and throw light on how the Conservative government viewed the situation. The third source is an extract from a speech given in the House of Commons by MP Winston Churchill which was recorded in Hansard from a debate in the House of Commons at the time of Eden's resignation.

Some historians argue that the real explanation for Eden's resignation in February 1938 lay in Chamberlain's conduct of foreign policy and his refusal to consult Eden or the Foreign Office. From the moment he became Prime Minister in 1937 he did not hesitate to act independently. It appears as if there were no meetings of the Foreign Affairs Committee between 1 July 1937 and January 1938.

However, Eden's resignation was not necessarily inevitable or even predictable when he wrote in December 1937. Disagreements and tensions between politicians are not unusual. In the 1930s, few would have guessed that Winston Churchill would become Britain's war leader. Distrusted by fellow Conservatives, he vigorously opposed the policy of appeasement, fearing that it would only encourage Hitler's appetite for more 'living space'. He attacked his party in government for failing to rearm the country.

Some teachers may wish to use this lesson with our three other lessons on Germany's occupation of the Rhineland and Chamberlain and Hitler and lesson on Adolf Hitler as leader in Related Resources.

All sources are provided with transcripts and simplified transcripts. Students could work on the sources individually or pairs and report back to the group with their findings.

Sources

Cover image: Anthony Eden, painted while Foreign Secretary by William Little (catalogue reference: INF 3/9)

Source 1: (catalogue reference: PREM 1/210)

Source 2: (catalogue reference: CAB/23/92f252)

Source 3: Hansard 22 February 1938

Background

When Eden writes that 1938 will be a difficult year, he might be referring to Italy's resignation from the League of Nations just three weeks previously. Eden mistrusted Italy almost more than Germany though he was certainly aware of the growing German threat.

Britain was also concerned about her possessions in the Far East: Hong Kong, Malaya and Singapore. The threat of Japanese aggression was a constant source of worry to British defence planners as Britain needed to maintain strong naval links with the Empire and if necessary defend its outposts.

The role of the United States is vital in understanding the whole issue of appeasement. Eden felt it was futile to try to reach agreement with the dictators. The best way to avoid war, in his opinion, was to involve the US alongside Britain in the Far East. If there were a European war, the US would automatically be committed as Britain's ally. He felt that all should be sacrificed to the objective of Anglo-American co-operation and actively sought Roosevelt's support.

Chamberlain on the other hand wanted to steer British policy more in the direction of appeasement in Europe and expected little from the United States. It was Chamberlain who sent a cold answer to Roosevelt's suggestion for an international conference. Eden took offence as he had been trying to encourage American involvement. Tensions between the two men mounted.

Eden and Chamberlain were both concerned with rearmament but Chamberlain was primarily worried about growing costs. In December 1937 Eden expressed his concern on this matter.

At the start of 1938, the international situation was becoming increasingly tense. Hitler was putting pressure on Austria to accept the union, or Anschluss, between Germany and Austria. Chamberlain was prepared to recognise Italy's conquest of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) to keep Italy as an ally in order to isolate Germany. Chamberlain's cabinet 'agreed that every effort must be made to come to an arrangement with Italy' (catalogue reference: CAB 23/92 f255). Eden found this unacceptable and resigned. Lord Halifax replaced him as Foreign Secretary.

External links

[Hansard \(1803-2005\)](#)¹

Read the full text of Churchill's speech in the official parliamentary record.

[What's the context? The resignation of Anthony Eden, 20 February 1938](#)²

More context on resignation of Anthony Eden in this blog.

¹ <https://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1938/feb/22/foreign-affairs>

² <https://history.blog.gov.uk/2018/02/20/whats-the-context-the-resignation-of-anthony-eden-20-february-1938/>

Tasks

Sources 1a-c

Look at Sources 1a, b and c. These are extracts from a letter from Anthony Eden to Neville Chamberlain.

- Can you describe the tone of the letter in the first paragraph? Is it formal or informal?
- Was it intended to be read by Chamberlain alone do you think?
- What evidence is there from the letter that Eden thought it important to build US support?
- Which aspects of Britain's defences did Eden think needed improving?
- What phrases can you find in the letter that show that Eden seemed to be underplaying his concerns? Clue: think about use of language and tone.
- What do you think the hand written comment made by Chamberlain at the top of the letter suggests? Clue: 'No. 11' refers to Downing Street the offices of the Chancellor of the Exchequer.
- Why did Eden write this letter to Chamberlain?
- Can you find evidence in the letter for any of the following reasons?
 - Eden was trying to put pressure on Chamberlain
 - He was trying to alert Chamberlain to the fact that Britain was playing a weak hand and needed a strong ally
 - He was calling for rearmament to be taken more seriously
 - The letter indicates fundamental tensions over foreign policy which could to flare up later

Source 2

Look at Source 2. This is another letter from Eden to Chamberlain.

- Why has Anthony Eden written this letter?
- What is the tone of the letter?
- If you accept that the differences over foreign policy between the two men are evident in Source 1, can we conclude that Eden's resignation was inevitable? Explain your reasons.

Source 3

Look at Source 3. These are extracts from Winston Churchill's speech in the House of Commons on the resignation of Anthony Eden (22 February 1938).

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- Why is it helpful to think about how and where this speech was delivered?
- What examples can you find in Churchill's speech of exaggerated or emotive language?
- What is the immediate cause for Eden's resignation according to Churchill?
- Can we trust Churchill's wider explanation for Eden's resignation?
- What are Churchill's views on how foreign policy should be handled at this time?

Source 1a: Letter from Anthony Eden to Neville Chamberlain, 1937.

Catalogue Ref: PREM 1/210

I have replied to this letter & I shall want to look at it again when I come to Nov. 2.

Eden's book

Foreign Office,
S.W.1.

31st December, 1937.

By Sean Neville.

This letter on the last day of 1937 is really to say thank you to you for your unvarying kindness and help to me this year. I really find it hard to express how much I have appreciated your readiness at all times to listen to my problems and help in their solution, despite your many other preoccupations.

1938 is obviously going to be a very difficult year internationally. Our rearmament will still be far from complete and we shall have a very disturbed world to deal with. At the same time there are elements of encouragement; first and foremost cooperation with the United States, though slow and difficult to foster, is now, I hope, making real progress. I shall know more about this after I have seen Ingersoll tomorrow, but I am sure that our rôle in this respect must be to do everything we can privately to encourage the Americans

The Right Honourable
Neville Chamberlain, M.P.

Source 1a: Transcript

I have upheld to this but I shall want to look at it again when I come to No.11, Neville

Foreign Office
S.W.1
31st December,

My Dear Neville,

This letter on the last day of 1937 is really to say thank you to you for your unvarying kindness and help to me this year. I really find it hard to express how much I have appreciated your readiness at all times to listen to my problems and help in their solution, despite your many other preoccupations.

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Source 1a: Transcript

Reference notes

Alexander G. M. Cadogan =

Sir Alexander George Montagu Cadogan: British politician in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the same time as Anthony Eden

A.E.M. Chatfield =

Lord A.E.M. Chatfield: Minister for Co-ordination of Defence for the British National Government (September 1939)

Royal E. Ingersoll =

President Roosevelt of USA sent American naval officer, Captain Royal E. Ingersoll, to London in late 1937. In January, 1938, Ingersoll discussed the possible relations and operations of the United States and Great Britain in case they 'were involved in a war with Japan in the Pacific which would include the Dutch, the Chinese, and possibly, the Russians.' From this time onward Ingersoll had no doubt that Roosevelt had war with Japan in the back of his mind and made no bones of this fact in his confidential discussions.

Robert Vansittart 'Van' =

Permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office. He was very anti-German. His hostility to Germany was such a threat to Chamberlain's policies that he was moved sideways to the prestigious but meaningless job of Chief Diplomatic Adviser in 1938.

G.C.B =

This means that someone is a member of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath

Cleverly =

Most likely a member of the Prime Ministers staff

Source 1b: Letter from Anthony Eden to Neville Chamberlain, 1937.

Catalogue Ref: PREM 1/210

3



Americans. If they do send some ships to Singapore in a few weeks' time that would be an event of first class importance. Curiously enough that very suggestion was made to me by the Dutch Minister this morning. I, of course, was careful to make no comment which could lead him to think that anything of the kind was likely to happen.

There is one other matter which I should like to mention. I am a little troubled by the fact that according to the account that Chatfield gave us at one of our meetings just before Christmas, we shall it appears be particularly weak at sea from May next year until the autumn of 1939. This unhappily is likely to be a most tricky period internationally, for our Air Force will be only entering on a full stage of development, while our anti-aircraft defence will still be almost non-existent in the modern sense. I have been wondering whether it might not be possible to accelerate some of the naval construction. Quite apart from the usefulness of such an acceleration in strengthening

our ...

Source 1b: Transcript


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Source 1c: Letter from Anthony Eden to Neville Chamberlain, 1937.

Catalogue Ref: PREM 1/210

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our defences during a critical period, the moral effect upon the world would be excellent. This may be quite impracticable and I did not want to write to you on the subject before Christmas; I only make the suggestion now in the hope that if it appeals to you, you may feel it worth while to have the matter further examined. The fact that commercial orders for new ships have recently fallen off may make it all the more possible to accelerate Admiralty construction.

Cleverly will, I think, have explained to you that we decided to bring Van's appointment out today, in view of guesses which the press were beginning to make on account of his G.C.B. I am sure that it was wise to do this and I consulted Van and he fully approved. Cadogan is settling in here very well and I am confident that the new order of things will work

~~very well~~ satisfactorily

Yours ever

Anthony Eden

Source 1c: Transcript

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Your ever,
Anthony Eden

The Right Honourable Neville Chamberlain, M.P.

Source 2: Letter from Anthony Eden to Neville Chamberlain, 1938.

Catalogue Ref: CAB/23/92 f252

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APPENDIX.Copy of Letter from the Secretary of State
for Foreign Affairs to the Prime Minister.

Foreign Office, S.W.1,
20th February, 1938.

My dear Prime Minister,

The events of the last few days have made plain a difference between us on a decision of great importance in itself and far-reaching in its consequences. I cannot recommend to Parliament a policy with which I am not in agreement.

Apart from this, I have become increasingly conscious, as I know you have also, of a difference of outlook between us in respect to the international problems of the day and also as to the methods by which we should seek to resolve them. It cannot be in the country's interest that those who are called upon to direct its affairs should work in an uneasy partnership, fully conscious of differences in outlook yet hoping that they will not recur. This applies with a special force to the relationship between the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary. It is for these reasons that with very deep regret I have decided that I must leave you and your colleagues with whom I have been associated during years of great difficulty and stress.

May I end on a personal note? I can never forget the help and counsel that you have always so readily given to me, both before and since you became Prime Minister. Our differences, whatever they may be, cannot efface that memory nor influence our friendship.

Yours ever,

ANTHONY EDEN.

Source 2: Transcript

Copy of Letter from the Secretary of State
for Foreign Affairs to the Prime Minister.

Foreign Office, S.W.1.,
20th February, 1938.

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Yours ever,
ANTHONY EDEN.

Source 3: Extracts from Winston Churchill's speech in the House of Commons on the resignation of Anthony Eden (22 February 1938).

...Evidently there were divergencies, marked no doubt by good will and all the courtesies of Cabinet association, between the Foreign Secretary and the new Prime Minister...first, to their conception of the present condition of the League of Nations and its Covenant; and, secondly, to the attitude which we should adopt towards the dictator Powers...

...It is quite easy to understand how Signor Mussolini should have instructed Count Grandi, if he did so instruct him—I am not quite clear—to encourage talks with Great Britain. But it is less easy to understand, I venture to submit—and I am endeavouring to argue this in a manner not calculated to cause heat of any kind—why we should have had hurried so eagerly to the rescue...

However, as I reconstruct the story, the Cabinet, from the usual vague, well-intentioned desire for peace and friendship, enjoined [called for] the Foreign Secretary to have these talks. It is quite clear that he was reluctant to do so, and, in my opinion, he was right...At any rate, at this point—on 11th February—the following statement is made in the Italian Press...Our opinion will not change until London's foreign policy ceases to be directed by Mr. Eden...that there was a demand that the Foreign Secretary should go, and that unless he went there could be no progress in these talks. I, therefore, read with very much concern in the London evening newspapers of the following Friday, 18th February, that my right honourable friend the Prime Minister had taken the negotiations into his own hands, and had invited Count Grandi to conduct discussions with him and the Foreign Secretary, not at the Foreign Office but at No. 10 Downing Street.

I think that the House must say, looking at it from a purely outside point of view, that this was clearly a decisive episode in the story which we have before us: clearly the deciding episode, the episode which brought these divergencies which have not been concealed to a definite head. Here is the Foreign Secretary attacked by a foreign Government through their controlled Press, his own papers filled with rumours that he will resign, and the Prime Minister coming in this peculiar and difficult situation and taking charge of the discussions himself..

I cannot myself contemplate the arrival of the British envoy at Rome to make a pact which, if it is successful, will involve the recognition of the conquest of Abyssinia. ...

The resignation of the late Foreign Secretary may well be a milestone in history. Great quarrels, it has been well said, arise from small occasions, but seldom from small causes. That there was a complete divergence between the late Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister is too plainly apparent. The late Foreign Secretary adhered to the old policy which we have all forgot for so long. The Prime Minister and his colleagues have entered upon another and a new policy.

The old policy was an effort to establish the rule of law in Europe and build up through the League of Nations, or by regional pacts under the League of Nations, effective deterrents against the aggressor. That is the policy which we have followed. Is the new policy—I hope we shall hear more about it—to come to terms with the totalitarian Powers in the hope that by great and far-reaching acts of submission, not merely in sentiment and pride, but in material factors, peace may be preserved?

Source 3: Image of Winston Churchill, 1944-45.

Catalogue Ref: INF 2/44 (2804)





Why do our hyperlinks come with footnotes?

Our resources are designed to be printed and used in classrooms, which means hyperlinks aren't always accessible digitally. We include the full link at the bottom of the page so that you can type in the address without distracting from the main text of the lesson materials.

Did you know?

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Our [Onsite Workshops](#) are available for free here at The National Archives and allow students to experience genuine original documents reflecting over 1000 years of history. From Elizabeth I's signature to the telegrams of the sinking Titanic, students love the wow-factor of being able to see real history on the desk in front of them.

Our [Online Workshops](#) allow our Education Officers to teach through your projector, leading discussions and guiding students through activities based around original documents. All you need is a computer with a projector, webcam and microphone. We'll arrange a test call before your session to check the tech is working.

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