

THE

NATIONAL

ARCHIVES

# Uncovering the past

How can we use photographs to find out about the past?

Key Stages 1-2 | Early 20th Century 1901-1918,  
Postwar 1945-present, Victorians 1850-1901

Lesson resource



# Introduction

This lesson shows us how we can use photographs, with examples from the Victorian period and more recent times, to uncover the past.

The National Archives has over 5 million photographs in its collections. They have been taken for many different reasons by different people working for the government. They include photographs from the Ministry of Information during the Second World War, photos from the Foreign and Colonial Offices or those held in police files. The largest collection of photographs, however, can be found in a collection called COPY 1. This is a collection of photographs and pictures that artists and photographers have chosen to copyright. This means they have recorded their right to control the copying or sharing of their work.

Use this lesson to see what you can discover about past lives from five different photographs from collections at The National Archives.

## Suitable for:

KS 1-2

## Time period:

Early 20th Century  
1901-1918, Postwar  
1945-present, Victorians  
1850-1901

## Connections to curriculum:

### Key stage 1:

'Pupils should develop an awareness of the past, using common words and phrases relating to the passing of time. They should know where the people and events they study fit within a chronological framework and identify similarities and differences between ways of life in different periods. They should use a wide vocabulary of everyday historical terms. They should ask and answer questions, choosing and using parts of stories and other sources to show that they know and understand key features of events. They should understand some of the ways in which we find out about the past and identify different ways in which it is represented.'

### Key stage 2:

'Pupils should continue to develop a chronologically secure knowledge and understanding of British, local and world history, establishing clear narratives within and across the periods they study. They should note connections, contrasts and trends over time and develop the appropriate use of historical terms. They should regularly address and sometimes devise historically valid questions about change, cause, similarity and difference, and significance. They should construct informed responses that involve thoughtful selection and organisation of relevant historical information. They should understand how our knowledge of the past is constructed from a range of sources.'

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## Teachers' notes

Photographs are an enjoyable way to get children to engage with sources without having the difficulty of text. They provide an important means for developing observational skills and appreciation of the difference between past and present or similarity and difference. Working with photographs is also good for developing their confidence in language skills.

### Introducing this lesson

To establish idea that we can find out things from photographs and to get children practiced in looking, start this activity by sharing different photographs in groups and let children talk about what they can see in the different photographs. These photographs can be taken from magazines or books, or the web. You could use old school photographs or those provided by the children themselves.

Discuss different types of photographs. Certainly, early photographs were posed and formal, but photography became more informal as camera technology advanced. It is now possible to take images quickly on our phones, a big change from the formal photographs of the early Victorians.

Finally explain what the term 'caption' means. All the photographs in this lesson have an original caption, not all photographs do. Why are these useful to historians? Try the caption exercise suggested here in the activities below after you have tried the lesson.

More detail on each photograph used in the lesson can be found in the Background notes.

### Further discussion

This lesson introduces pupils to five different photographs. Print out copies of the photographs from the website, or a project large image version of it on a whiteboard. Encourage pupils to work in pairs to make observational comments based on who and what they see. Ask them to describe the content and appearance of the image. Use the questions provided as prompts. Then encourage pupils to become more analytical in order to make sense of their observations. Is the photographed posed in any way? Why might this photograph have been taken? Who could have been the audience for it?

[You may wish to split this lesson depending on time available or focus on fewer photographs as each photograph task is free standing.]

The first photograph to explore is the oldest and shows a group of black singers. It is worth discussing with learners that photographs of black people are an important visual record of their presence as 19th century written records often lack details about their lives. For example, census material gathered every ten years in the 19th century, only provided information about place of birth, not ethnicity. It is worth pointing out too that to find out more about black lives, historians need to research other sources including newspapers, wills, marriage, birth and death certificates

## Teachers' notes

and artwork. Here are more 19th century photographs online portraying black lives for example. The Background notes also contain more details on the Fisk Jubilee singers.

The second photograph to be investigated shows a female street lemonade seller from 1884. Students are encouraged to think how it could be used as evidence for lives of men and women; children and childhood; clothing or even leisure. In the photograph everyone is clearly looking at the camera. We see that the boy is barefoot and woman thin and gaunt. Can they describe their clothing? Are the other people better dressed? The background notes give details as to why this photograph was taken. There is an opportunity to discuss with the students that we could find other photographs to help us find out more about lives in the past that could show difference between the rich and poor, types of jobs or the differences between living in the rural and urban settings too.

The third photograph shows Mary Wheatland in 1903. She was born in 1835. Make sure that your students understand the details of her story given on the webpage before looking at her photograph. They should also be able to work out the age she stopped swimming. The photograph seems to be in the style of 'portrait painting' as well as in its actual orientation. What can they learn from this photograph about changing roles of women?

The fourth photograph examined comes from 1938 and shows teatime at the home of a miner at the Penallta Colliery near Hengoed in the Rhymney Valley in South Wales. Show the class the location on map if possible and any photographs that you can find which depict coal mines and miners at work. Use the photograph in the lesson to make comparisons between past and present, similarity and difference in home life and domestic settings.

Our final photograph, from more recent times, is a scene from Carnaby Street in 1969. As well as encouraging the class to examine this photograph, teachers could work with them to create a timeline for the 1960s. They could find out about key events in Britain. Introduce them to the value of oral history by encouraging them to ask family and friends if they remember what life was like in the 1960s. Do they recall the events recorded on their timeline?

## Other activities

- Create a timeline poster to show how these photographs fit into a chronology including: Source 1 (1870); Source 2 (1884); Source 3 (1903); Source 4 (1938) Source 5 (1969). Ask small groups pupils to research 10 additional events/inventions to add to the timeline.
- Write a story/interview/play about a person from any photograph in this lesson.
- Create speech bubbles for any of the people in the photographs.
- Create a 'soundscape': Find some non-copyright sounds/music from the web appropriate for the 1960s photograph.
- Watch the short video about 'Fisk Jubilee Singers' listed in external links below. You can hear some their earliest recordings, see more photographs and find out more about their story.
- Ask the pupils to take their own photographs on a camera phone, some posed and others not. How does this create a different type of photograph? Are posed photographs less valuable for finding out about the past?

## Teachers' notes

- Discuss which photograph in this lesson is most useful; interesting; surprising or accessible. Students explain why/why not.
- Change the caption exercise:
  - Give the pupils copies of any photograph of your choice.
  - Explain the meaning of the term caption. Explain they are important to historians as they can reveal the message of a photograph.
  - Now ask pupils to write their own caption for the photograph. Compare their results.
  - Discuss why an original caption with an old photograph can be important to historians. Why can they help? Can they be misleading too?
- Debate: Is a photograph worth more than a thousand words?
- Use the Related Resources to find further photographs to find out about the past
- Use the lesson 'illustration photograph' at the top of the page (and its caption) as an activity where the pupils devise and answer their own questions.

## Sources

Illustration Image: 'Photographing New York City on a slender support eighteen stories above pavement of Fifth Avenue. Man holding camera to his face seated on an iron girder.' Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/528 f.136

Source 1: 'Photograph of the Jubilee Singers from Fisk University, United States of America, four male figures standing and seven females sitting', 2 June 1874, Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/25 f.182

Source 2: 'Photograph of woman standing by a can of lemonade drink, with a boy drinking out of glass, other figures.' September 1884, Catalogue ref: COPY 1/369/ f.269

Source 3: 'Photograph of Mary Wheatland, the Bognor bathing woman' 1903, Catalogue ref: COPY 1/465/f.33

Source 4: 'Miner and wife and children at mealtime,' 1938. This photograph is part of a collection showing 'Housing and living conditions' for workers in British coalmines, Catalogue ref: COAL 80/2062/11

Source 5: 'London: shopping: streets and shops: Teenagers in Carnaby Street', 1969, Catalogue ref: INF 14/147

## Background

The Fisk Jubilee Singers performed in London in May 1873 for Queen Victoria. This was the start of their tour in Britain. It was a significant musical event. George L. Cole was the musical director of the group, a white ex-soldier from the American Civil War and who does not appear in the photograph shown here. Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee was founded in 1866 by the American Missionary Association. The University aimed to educate freed African Americans after the abolition of slavery in 1865. The Jubilee Singers grew out of an early singing class held at the University aimed at fund raising for the college. The youngest was 14-year-old Minniver Tate. From the start their musical repertoire was wide ranging and included popular songs as well as classical compositions. They went on to incorporate slave songs and black spiritual music which audiences loved.

The photograph of the lemonade seller provides some information about the daily lives of adult street sellers. It was commissioned by Charles H. Spurgeon, a Baptist minister who wanted to create lantern slides of working people for his sermons. In the 1880s, there were roughly 30,000 street sellers or costermongers in London. It is possible to find out more about the lives of street sellers in the Victorian period from 'London Labour and the London Poor' by contemporary investigative journalist Henry Mayhew. His four-volume collection of interviews and engravings captures the lives of London's working classes in the mid-19th century.

Another image of Mary Wheatland, shown in this lesson, can be located online at the [National Portrait Gallery](#)<sup>1</sup> and local photographs of the town at Bognor Local History Museum. A Blue Plaque is planned to remember Mary Wheatland on Bognor Regis Pier. The Royal Humane Society is a charity that grants awards for acts of bravery in the saving of human life and for the restoration of life by resuscitation. The society awarded Mary Wheatland her bronze and silver medals.

The photograph of the mining family in 1938 having a teatime meal comes from the National Coal Board collection of photographs and albums relating to all aspects of the British coalmining industry which included housing and living conditions. The first pit head baths in North East Derbyshire were opened at Grassmoor Colliery in 1929. According to the National Coal Mining Museum, by the end of the Second World War, pithead baths were available to 63% of the workforce an important improvement for mining families. Before baths were provided at the coal mine, miners went home dirty from their work. They washed in a tin bath in front of the fire or outside in the back yard. Everyday their wives had to boil heavy buckets of water for these baths and wash the miners' work clothes. This was an exhausting job.

The final photograph belongs to a collection (1939-1979) from the Publications Division for the Ministry of Information and Central Office of Information. Selected official photographs were used to for publicity material issued by this government department. This photograph was part of a series covering shopping streets in London, including Oxford Street and showed its fruit and flower sellers and department stores, Orchard Street, New Bond Street and Carnaby Street which was described as 'the headquarters of the world famous "mini" in this collection.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw249171/Mary-Wheatland>



# Tasks

## Source 1

Photograph caption: 'Photograph of the Jubilee Singers from Fisk University, United States of America, four male figures standing and seven females sitting', 2 June 1874, Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/25 f.182

Men standing at the back: from left to right Edmund Watkins; I. P. Dickerson; Benjamin M Holmes; Thomas Rutling.

Women seated: from the left to right: Georgia Gordon; Mabel Rosa Lewis; Maggie L Porter; Jennie Jackson [centre] Ella Sheppard; Julia Jackson, Minniver U. Yates.

Look at the photograph:

- How many men and women you can see in this photograph of the 'Jubilee Singers'?
- Can you describe their hairstyles and clothing?
- Where has the photograph been taken? Give your reasons.
- Why is the group arranged in this way for the photograph?
- How can we date the photograph?
- Why has this photograph been taken do you think?
- What does this picture show us about photography at that time?
- What can a photograph show us which a written document might not?
- Why do you think this photograph is important for learning about Victorian times?
- Find out more about the Jubilee Singers using [this video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yID4zvvN79Y).

## Source 2

Photograph caption: 'Photograph of woman standing by a can of lemonade drink, with a boy drinking out of glass, other figures.' September 1884, Catalogue ref: COPY 1/369/ f.269 islands.

Look at the photograph:

- Describe 3 people in the photograph.
- Where has the photograph been taken?
- What does the photograph show about: lives of men, women and children; clothing; leisure?
- Why has this photograph been taken? Give your reasons.
- What could have happened before this photograph was taken?
- Explain how other Victorian photographs showing people could help us find out more their lives in the past?

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yID4zvvN79Y>



# Tasks

## Source 3

Photograph caption: 'Photograph of Mary Wheatland, the Bognor bathing woman'  
1903, Catalogue ref: COPY 1/465/f.33

Mary Wheatland (1835-1924), from the age of 14, worked as a bathing machine operator, gave swimming lessons to children and acted as lifeguard in the seaside town of Bognor. She stopped swimming in 1906 owing to rheumatism. She was awarded two medals from the Royal Humane Society for saving over thirty people from drowning. Mary became famous with visitors to Bognor and was also pictured on postcards!

Look at the photograph.

- Can you find the name of the person in the photograph? [Also check the caption for her name.]
- Look at her face, what type of person do you think she was?
- What is she holding?
- What do the medals suggest about this person?
- Why do you think she is wearing a hat?
- Why do you think this photograph was taken?
- The style of this photograph is called 'portrait'. Can you explain why?
- Can you find out what a 'Landscape' photograph would look like?
- Look at the background of this photograph, where does it suggest the photograph was taken?
- How can we say that this photograph is posed?
- What does the photograph show about changes in women's lives at that time? [Clue: think about her job]
- Mary was born in 1835. How old was she when she stopped swimming in 1906?

## Source 4

Photograph entitled: 'Miner and wife and children at mealtime', 1938. This photograph is part of a collection showing 'Housing and living conditions' for workers in British coalmines, Catalogue ref: COAL 80/2062/11

This miner worked at the Penallta Colliery near Hengoed in the Rhymney Valley in South Wales.

Look at the photograph.

- Can you describe the people in the photograph?
- Where are they photographed?
- What are they doing?
- How different is this meal to mealtimes today?
- How is the room furnished and decorated?
- How different is it from today?
- How is this room heated?
- How do you think this family washed their clothes?

## Tasks

- How do you think they spent their free time?
- What things could help us to date this photograph?

## Source 5

Photograph entitled: 'London: shopping: streets and shops: Teenagers in Carnaby Street', 1969, Catalogue ref: INF 14/147

Look at the photograph.

- Can you describe the clothing worn by the people in the photograph?
- How old do you think they are?
- What does the word 'teenager' mean?
- What does this photograph tell us about fashion and hair styles in the 1960s?
- Why is it helpful that this is a colour photograph?
- Where has this photograph been taken?
- Why might it have been taken?
- What of sort of photograph is this?
- Can you create a timeline for the 1960s? Find out about key events in Britain.
- Ask family and friends if they remember what life was like in the 1960s. Do they remember the events on your timeline?

**Source 1: Photograph of the Jubilee Singers from Fisk University, 1874.** Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/25 f.182





**Source 2: Photograph of woman standing by a can of lemonade drink, with boy drinking out of glass, 1884. Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/369/ f.269**





**Source 3: Photograph of Mary Wheatland, the Bognor bathing woman, 1903. Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/465/f.33**





## Source 4: Miner and wife and children at mealtime, 1938.

Catalogue Ref: COAL 80/2062/11





**Source 5: London: shopping: streets and shops: Teenagers in Carnaby Street, 1969. Catalogue Ref: INF 14/147**







## 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?

The National Archives Education Service also offers free workshops onsite in Kew and online in your classroom.

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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## Find out more:

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