Population: Continuities and Changes

These activities provide overviews of three aspects of the history of population in Britain:

1. continuities and changes in the total population since the Roman period

2. the distribution of population between countryside and towns

3. the geographical distribution of the largest towns

Population, along with climate and the importance of the harvest, can be such 'background' topics that students don't appreciate the importance of their impact on people's living and working conditions. They are also topics which benefit from being seen in the long view across many centuries as well as within individual periods. Hence these activities are worth repeating on several occasions during KS3 so that students see the whole pattern several times as well as relating it to conditions within individual periods and so developing their understanding of the consequences of changes in population. These overviews can also be used within those GCSE Thematic studies where population changes significantly affected developments.

Activity 1. Continuities and changes in the total population since the Roman period

This PowerPoint sequence uses Lego bricks to represent the total population – 1 brick represents roughly 2 million people if focussing on England and Wales, more than 2 million if looking at the whole UK. (I've said 'roughly' because we are not certain of exact population totals before the mid 1800's.) I've used Lego bricks because I find this physical representation makes the continuities and changes much clearer – even clearer than a graph or verbal description as an overview. Graphs and verbal descriptions are great as follow-up though.

Suggestions for use:

a) Show students the opening image which has 26 bricks representing the population c.2000. Ask students to suggest how many bricks/people there would have been in the Roman period and then to predict the pattern of population change between the Roman period and today – maybe offer them a couple of options e.g. the pattern as a series of ups and downs or of gradual steady increase?

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b) Then show students the whole sequence quickly, asking them to concentrate on the pattern – does it fit the pattern they are expecting? You can provide your own voice-over mentioning periods and some well-known events to help them keep track of where they are in time. However don't describe or explain the population pattern so that students need to think about this for themselves. Don't take more than two minutes at most so they see the whole pattern quickly.

c) Ask them to explain what surprised them or what fitted their expectations, then to describe the pattern from memory, maybe giving them vocabulary prompts such as change, continuity, stagnation, turning points. Focus on the pattern – e.g. the peaks in the 5th and 13th centuries and the drops that follow – rather than the totals. If needed, show the sequence again so that students can compare it with their first go at descriptions.

d) Ask students to suggest:

i) reasons for continuities and changes in the pattern e.g. plagues (as in the 6th and 14thC and later), nutrition, medicine etc

ii) the consequences of changes in population e.g. demands on governments, need for food and housing, quality of life in towns, epidemic diseases, crime rates etc

Alternatively – abandon the PowerPoint sequence and use your students instead of the Lego bricks! If, for example, one student represents 2 million people then a class of around 25 will make this work in a memorable way e.g. you have the whole class standing at the front to represent the modern population, then just 1 to be the population for much of the period! As Professor Mark Ormrod has commented, if we went back in time to the Middle Ages one of the most notable differences was that England was very empty!

(Or turn the PowerPoint sequence into a mini-film with your own voiceover)

Population totals used in the sequence. All totals before the development of thorough censuses are estimates based on limited evidence. For example, estimates for the population c1300 vary from as high as around 6 million to as low as 3.75 million. Therefore please treat the totals below as **rounded estimates** – they are for **England and Wales** not the whole of the UK.

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100AD – 2m	600AD – 2m	1100 - 2m	1600 – 4m
200AD – 3m	700AD - 2m	1200 – 3m	1700 – 5m
300AD – 4m	800AD - 2m	1300 – 5 m	1800 – 8m
400AD – 5 m	900AD - 2m	1400 – 2m	1900 – 30m
500AD – 2m	1000AD - 2m	1500 – 2m	2000 – 52m

Activity 2. The distribution of population between countryside and towns

The aim is to demonstrate the changing distribution of rural/urban population in a simple, memorable way.

Get 10 students standing at the front and ask the class how many of the ten would be living in towns around the time of the Norman Conquest – proportionally it's 1 of the 10 students so move one student to the urban side of the room with the other 9 on the rural side.

Then move forward in time, focussing on the distribution of population in 1600, 1800, 1850 and 1900.

At each date first ask students to predict the balance, based on what they think might have been happening at that time (good for diagnosing their knowledge and perceptions of events, especially when beginning GCSE Themes). Then move students from rural to urban in accord with the numbers below.

That balance is roughly:

1100 - 90% rural

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1600 – still 90% rural

1800 – 80% rural

1850 – 50% rural

1900 – 25% rural

Discussion can then move onto:

a) describing the pattern and pace of change

b) suggesting reasons for continuities and changes

c) exploring the consequences of this changing distribution.

Activity 3. The geographical distribution of the largest towns

This activity explores the distribution of the largest towns in England in the late 1300s, 1600s and 1800s. It demonstrates how industrialisation and the Atlantic trade shifted the distribution significantly from the east to the west and north. The idea is simply to use your room as a map of England, identify north, south, east and west and maybe mark some well-known places such as London and Liverpool and wherever your school is situated. If you wish you can obviously add towns in the rest of the UK too.

a) Explain the set up of the room as a map and ask students to predict where the largest towns were in the later middle ages and maybe suggest some towns which might be in the list of the biggest half-dozen. Then ask individuals to stand on the 'map' in the places shown in the table below – does this fit students' expectations? Why were these the largest towns (direction of trade, government and religious centres)

b) Repeat the above firstly for the late 1600s and then for mid 1800s, revealing continuities and changes in the pattern – what are the biggest changes students observe and why do they think these changes took place?

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As above, the activity is valuably followed up by looking at maps and writing explanations but the physical introduction of these ideas is likely to help make the patterns more memorable.

The towns to be represented by students are:

Late 1300s		Late 1600s	Mid 1800s
(Over 10,000)		**(Over 10,000)**	**(Over 100,000)**
London		London	London
Bristol		Bristol	Liverpool
York		York	Manchester
(Over 5000)		Newcastle	Birmingham
Newcastle	Beverley	Yarmouth	Leeds
Lincoln	Boston	Norwich	Bristol
Lynn	Norwich	Colchester	Sheffield
Coventry	Colchester	Exeter	Bradford
Canterbury	Salisbury		

Details from *The Historical Atlas of Britain*, ed. John Gillingham and Malcolm Falkus, 1981. The ranking of towns for the 1300s is based on tax returns, particularly that of 1334, and for the 1600s on hearth taxes taken in the 1660s and 1670s.

Other Notes:

1300s – the next towns in terms of size include other eastern-facing towns - Hull, Ipswich and Yarmouth; ecclesiastical centres – Bury St Edmunds, Shrewsbury, Hereford, Worcester and Gloucester; university towns – Oxford and Cambridge. All were also major market towns.

1600s – by the late 1600s there were signs of change taking place with future cities in the second rank of towns of 5000-10,000 – Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham and others, including the dockyard towns of Chatham and Portsmouth. However there were still plenty of long-established towns in this second rank – Ipswich, Bury St Edmunds, Hull, Lynn, Canterbury, Salisbury, Coventry, Worcester. Change was taking place but it was still slow change.

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And also see …

The impact of harvests

For an activity on the importance of harvests in pre-industrial society see:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/WhyWasTheHarvestSoImportant.html

There's been lots of positive feedback on the impact of this activity on students' understandings.

How many people could vote?

For another example of the power of using students to represent the pattern of change see:

https://thinkinghistory.co.uk/ActivityBase/CornLawsandVote.html

This shows how the proportion of the population who could vote changed with each Reform Act – or use the very clear PowerPoint sequence as well!

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