

What happened at Cable Street? Using Eyewitness Accounts and Historical Sources to Reconstruct Events

Enquiry Question: *How can we use historical sources to reconstruct what happened at Cable Street?*

Lesson Objectives

- Reconstruct the events of October 4th, 1936
- Explain how different groups experienced the day differently
- Reach conclusions based on multiple sources

Introduction

In the previous two lessons, students explored the factors that led to the confrontation at Cable Street. They examined why the British Union of Fascists (BUF) attracted support during the 1930s, why London's East End became a particular target for fascist activity, and why anti-fascist organisations, political parties and Jewish groups disagreed about how Mosley's proposed march should be challenged. Having established the causes and tensions that led up to October 1936, the focus now shifts to the events of the day itself.

The next two lessons ask students to investigate what happened on October 4th, 1936 and how those events have been reconstructed by historians. Rather than receiving a simple narrative account, students will work with a range of historical evidence, including eyewitness testimony, contemporary newspaper reports, maps, official decisions taken by the police and government, and later historical interpretations. Through these sources, they will piece together the sequence of events and consider the experiences of the different individuals and groups involved.

A central aim of both lessons is to develop students' understanding of historical enquiry. They are not simply asking "*What happened?*", they are also asking, "*How do we know what happened?*" They will use sources that give different perspectives, emphasise different details, and sometimes present contrasting interpretations of the same event. Students will therefore be encouraged to question the reliability, usefulness and limitations of the evidence they encounter and to recognise that our knowledge and understanding of Cable Street are built up from surviving sources.

The nuances and complexities of historical experience are explored: fascists, anti-fascists, local residents, police, journalists and politicians each experienced the day differently and provide us with different types of evidence. By examining these contrasting viewpoints, students will gain a fuller understanding of both the events themselves and the challenges faced by historians seeking to explain them.

Throughout the lessons, students should be encouraged to return to a number of core historical questions. These questions provide a framework for both investigating the events and evaluating the evidence used to reconstruct them:

Core Historical Questions

- What happened?
- Who was involved?
- What did they experience?
- Why do different people remember the same events differently?
- What conclusions can historians safely reach?

These questions move students beyond simple description and towards historical interpretation. As they analyse and compare sources, students should recognise that evidence is often incomplete, selective and shaped by particular viewpoints. The challenge for historians is not simply to collect stories from the past but to weigh those stories against one another and develop the most convincing explanation supported by the available evidence.

By the end of the two lessons, students should be able to reconstruct what happened, analyse eyewitness testimony as a form of historical evidence, explain why different groups interpreted and experienced the day differently, and reach their own supported conclusions by drawing together information from multiple sources. In doing so, they will further develop the disciplinary thinking skills of evidence evaluation, interpretation and judgement that are central to the study of history. They will also be in a strong position to evaluate the meaning and legacy of Cable Street, which is where we turn next.

It can be seen then that these two lessons form the centrepiece of the unit. Although timings are given in the Lesson Plan, teachers can use their discretion as to where it is appropriate to pause between the lessons.

Key Information

This lesson is designed for students aged 13 and above. It is devised for History classes.

The timings suggested are based on a one-hour lesson and may need adapting based on circumstances. Some adaptations have been suggested where appropriate.

Prior knowledge is not needed. However, the notion that students may arrive with knowledge, ideas and preconceptions is embraced and should be utilised to explore and resolve misconceptions.

If practical, students should remain in the same small group throughout this course of lessons.

Resources:

- Lesson plan
- Lesson PowerPoint containing:
 - a short video (Slide 6)
- Student worksheet (A4 double-sided; one per student)
- Map (A4; one per pair)
- Information sheet (A4 double-sided; one per pair)
- Police Commissioner's Report (A4 double-sided; one per pair)
- Source Type Sorting Cards (One set per pair)

Starter (5 minutes)

With **Slide 2** showing, ask the question, "If 100,000 people witnessed the same event, would they all tell the same story?" Hopefully students will answer the question with a "no", the teacher should then ask why not. Highlight, perhaps by writing on the board, reasons which focus on how different viewpoints may be dependent on the reason why an eyewitness was present in the first place.

Recap what we have learnt (**Slide 3**). Either ask these questions to the whole class, or ask students to pair-check answers. Take feedback (**Slide 4**).

1. Who led the BUF?
2. Why did they want to march through the East End?
3. Why did many residents oppose the march?
4. Why did the Home Office initially allow it to go ahead?

Activity: Mapping the Battle (15 minutes)

Give pairs of students a worksheet each, a map and an information sheet per pair. Ask them to annotate or highlight on their copy of the map the places shown on the board (**Slide 5**) and answer the questions in **Tasks 1 and 2** of the worksheet. Then take feedback (**Slides 5 and 6**).

- Tower Hill
- Aldgate
- Gardiner's Corner
- Cable Street
- Lemon Street
- St George's Street

Task 2: the battleground (**Slide 6**)

1. Why was Aldgate important? *(It was the gateway to the East End; large Jewish population nearby; it would show that the BUF had support in the area if they marched there)*
2. Why was Cable Street easy to block? *(Narrow streets were easy to barricade; residents knew the local streets and alleys better than the police and BUF.)*
3. How did geography help protesters? *(Narrow streets were easy to barricade; the dense network of streets and alleys allowed protestors to move round the area quickly to reinforce barricades and gather in large numbers to block the march; harder for the police to control the crowd.)*

Task 2: Who Was There?

Use the information sheet and write in the numbers of each group present on the day.

- Fascists:
- Police
- Anti-fascists (including both Jews and non-Jews)

Why are the numbers not more accurate?

Activity: Source Investigation (10 minutes)

Give pairs of students the sources worksheet and ask them to complete **Task 3** on their worksheet, using **Source A (Slide 7)**. Note that both sources (Reg Weston's and Joe Jacob's) are quite long, so time must be allowed for students to read them and pick out the information they need. One approach might be to give all students their own copy of the sources sheet, pairs of students can then divide Sources A and B between them, taking a paragraph each, for example.

The purpose of this task, apart from gaining information about the events of the day, is to show students how to interrogate eyewitness testimony and introduce the central theme that memory can be both valuable and selective. By highlighting what Reg saw, heard and believed, students will be in a better position to later interrogate other eyewitness testimonies.

Key sections of Reg Weston's testimony include:

- Crowded streets
- Packed pavements
- Tram barricades
- Rumours spreading through crowds

As students work through the testimony, move around the room checking in and asking questions, perhaps variants of the worksheet questions, to ensure understanding. After a suitable period of time, take feedback (**Slide 7**)

Discussion: (5 minutes)

Is Seeing the Same as Knowing? (**Slide 8**) Reg Weston describes:

- Crowds
- Rumours
- Confusion

Question: Does being present automatically make someone reliable? (*Try to draw out what might make Weston reliable **and** unreliable.*)

Activity: Source Investigation (10 minutes)

Using **Source B** - Joe Jacobs' eyewitness testimony – students complete **Task 4** in the worksheet.

The teacher may want to tell students that key sections of Joe Jacobs' testimony (not included in the students source) include descriptions of:

- Growing tension before the march
- Anti-fascist organisation
- Expectations of confrontation

The following questions can be used in discussion to help students interrogate the source if desired:

1. What evidence is there that the Communist Party seems to be organised?
2. What actions are described?
3. What emotions are evident?
4. Summarise how Joe Jacobs portrays events?

As before, move around the room checking in and asking questions, perhaps variants of the worksheet questions, to ensure understanding, then take whole class feedback (**Slide 9**).

Discussion: Do both witnesses remember events in the same way? (**Slide 10**)

Take ideas and thoughts on this question from the class, ensuring that students provide support for what they say. Then conclude with the two points below which we must be aware of when interpreting the past and making related judgements about the present.

- Memory is valuable.
- Memory can also be selective

NB: This would make a suitable break between lessons. The Plenary (given at the end of this Lesson Plan) could be used at this point.

Activity: Source Investigation – Other Voices (12-15 minutes) (Slide 11)

In pairs, students complete **Task 5** on their worksheet, using **Sources C – G**. The pairs could divide the sources between them if desired.

Take feedback on the questions. Ensure that students can give evidence from the sources to support what they say.

- What was the atmosphere like on the day? Did people expect violence?
- Is there evidence that young people were politically active, even though they could not vote?
- Who were protestors mainly in conflict with? (*The police*) Does this surprise you? (*It shouldn't be surprising as it was the police who were trying to clear the route.*)
- What can we learn about the range of people involved in the protests?
- What does the building of barricades tell us about the involvement of the local community? (*Barricades were built by local residents and political activists and symbolised community resistance, evidence that the community would not let the fascists pass through their neighbourhood.*)

Video: Eyewitness Testimony – Pathé News (5 minutes)

Tell students that Pathé News was a British-French newsreel and documentary making company. This film footage is a different type of eyewitness testimony. Show students the questions (**Slide 12**) before watching the film clip and tell them to note down anything relevant in **Task 6**.

Questions:

1. Are there any details that appear in the newsreel which were not in written accounts you have seen?
2. Which source seems most convincing? Why?
3. Any other points of interest?

Activity: Source Investigation: The BUF Perspective (10 minutes)

Inform students that to get a full picture of the events we cannot just rely on accounts from anti-fascists and other protestors, we need to hear the voices of the authorities and the BUF. We will begin with the BUF. Using **Sources H – K**, students complete **Task 7** on their worksheet.

Take feedback on the questions. Ensure that students can give evidence from the sources to support what they say. **(Slide 13)**

- What was the atmosphere like amongst the BUF?
- How would you describe the fascists attitude to violence?
- According to the sources, what did the fascists think about the day of the march?
- What other points of interest can you take from these sources? *(Answers may include the distances travelled by some – Lancashire, Hull and Leeds; the emphasis on maintaining discipline; anger at their march being prevented, as a positive event in BUF history.)*

Activity: Source Investigation: The Police Perspective (10 minutes)

Remind students that the role of the Metropolitan Police was to keep the peace and uphold the right to lawful assembly. Thousands of officers were deployed, including all of the Metropolitan Police Mounted Division and officers repeatedly attempted to clear routes. Eventually, police leadership concluded the march could not proceed.

In pairs, students receive a copy of the Sir Phillip Game's account of the day. Using that, and Bill Fishman's summary on the Information Sheet, they should complete **Task 8** on their worksheet.

Questions:

- What were police trying to achieve?
- Why did protestors become angry with police?
- Why might police officers describe the day differently from protestors?
- What do you notice about the number of arrests and who was arrested?
- Do the numbers of arrests show whose side the police might have been on? *(The answer here is no, police and anti-fascists were in direct confrontation, the BUF were not.)*

After a suitable period of time take feedback **(Slide 14)**.

Discussion Question: Did the police support the BUF?

Extension: Can two different groups both believe they are protecting democracy?

Discussion: The Home Office Response (5 minutes)

Explain that the Home Office, under advice from the police, changed position regarding the BUF march.

Students already know that the Home Office initially allowed the march, but on the day, as conditions deteriorated and police concerns grew, the authorities changed their position and – as detailed in Sir Philip Game’s report – Mosley was informed his route could not continue.

Discussion Questions:

- Why did the Home Secretary decide to ban the march in the end?
- Was this:
 - a victory for protesters?
 - a practical decision?
 - both?

Activity: Newspapers Report the Battle (10 minutes)

Display newspaper headlines (**Slide 15**)

- Daily Worker: "Mosley Did Not Pass"
- Daily Herald: "Street Battles Stop Mosley March"
- Daily Mirror: "84 Arrests As Thousands Stampede In London Riots"
- Jewish Chronicle: "The People Said "No!""

Students complete **Task 9** on their worksheet using the newspaper headlines (**Sources L – O; Slide 15**) and the information below about the various newspapers (which is on the Information Sheet).

- Daily Worker: Communist Party newspaper; far left, strongly anti-fascist, pro-working class and supportive of mass protest and direct action against fascism. It was the

official newspaper of the Communist Party of Great Britain and played a major role in mobilising opposition to the BUF.

- Daily Herald: Pro-Labour Party, pro-trade union, anti-fascist, left-wing newspaper, jointly owned by the Trades Union Congress and Oldhams Press.
- Daily Mirror: A popular mass-market newspaper owned by Lord Rothermere (who also owned the Daily Mail).
- Jewish Chronicle: Mainstream British Jewish newspaper; anti-fascist, concerned about antisemitism, but generally opposed street confrontation and favoured legal and political solutions. The paper often reflected the cautious approach of established Jewish leaders such as the Board of Deputies.

After a suitable period of time, take feedback (**Slide 16**)

Discussion Questions:

1. Which headline sounds victorious? How so?
2. Which sounds defensive? How so?
3. Did everybody interpret the day in the same way? Why not?

Activity: Source Evaluation (5-8 minutes)

In order to be confident in working out what happened on the day, students need to evaluate the sources of information to know what information they can take as fact and what needs to be treated with caution.

Give pairs of students a pack of Source Type cards and ask them to arrange them on a continuum from Most Useful ↔ Least Useful for finding out about the Battle of Cable Street.

Sources: Maps / Reg Weston / Joe Jacobs / Petition / Newspapers / Police Reports / Newsreels / BUF Members / Jewish Protestors

After a suitable period, take feedback (**Slide 17**). Students must justify their decisions.

Activity: Historian's Challenge – Reaching a Conclusion (10-12 minutes)

This activity can be completed as a homework if time is short.

Point out to the class that they have now looked at a wide range of evidence about what happened at Cable Street on October 4th, 1936. Explain that they have also evaluated that evidence and are now in a position to reach a historically supported conclusion.

On their worksheet, students complete **Task 10**: Using all evidence, what can we confidently say happened?

We know...

We think...

We cannot be certain about...

Plenary: Another Voice (8-10 minutes)

Ctrl + Click on the photograph of Johnny Longstaff (**Slide 18**) to play the song “Cable Street” by The Young’uns. The voice students will hear is that of Johnny Longstaff, an anti-fascist who was at Cable Street and later fought in the Spain against Franco’s fascists, aged just 17.

Ask students to write down on their worksheet (**Task 11**) anything that they hear in the song and Johnny Longstaff’s words that they have knowledge of from what they have already studied. They should also note down anything that they did not already recognise.

Play until the end of Longstaff’s voice after the song has finished. If there is time it might be beneficial to play the song through again, to ensure that students get as many details as possible.

Discussion Question: This song was recorded in 2019. Does that fact tell us anything about the importance of the memory of the Battle of Cable Street? (*Answers may mention that the event is significant enough to warrant a song in a stage show many years later.*)

NB: This activity would also make a suitable starter if desired. It could be used to end Lesson 3 after the discussion using **Slide 8**.

APPENDIX A Student Worksheet

What did people see at Cable Street, and how can historians know what happened?

As instructed by your teacher, work through this worksheet in pairs, each person completing their own worksheet. Discuss each question before writing your answers.

Task 1: Mapping the Battle

1. Why was Aldgate important?
2. Why was Cable Street easy to block?
3. How did geography help protesters?

Task 2: Who was there?

Use the Information Sheet and add the numbers of each group that were present on the day.

- Fascists:
- Police:
- Anti-fascists (including both Jews and non-Jews):

Why are the numbers not more accurate?

Task 3: Source Investigation – Reg Weston

Read Source A and highlight:

- What people were feeling.
- Evidence of organisation.
- Evidence of community involvement.

Use the source to answer these questions:

1. Why do you think people came onto the streets?
2. What emotions are described?
3. What can an eyewitness tell us that a textbook cannot?

Task 4: Source Investigation – Joe Jacobs

Read Source B and answer the questions below.

5. What evidence is there that the Communist Party seems to be organised?
6. What actions are described?
7. What emotions are evident?
8. Summarize how Joe Jacobs portrays events?

Task 5: Other Voices

Using Sources C – G answer the questions below. Be ready to feedback with evidence.

1. What was the atmosphere like on the day? Did people expect violence?
2. Is there evidence that young people were politically active, even though they could not vote?
3. Who were protestors mainly in conflict with? Does this surprise you?
4. What can we learn about the range of people involved in the protests?
5. What does the building of barricades tell us about the involvement of the local community?

Task 6: Newsreel

Whilst watching the film clip note down anything relevant in answer to the questions below.

4. Are there any details that appear in the newsreel which were not in written accounts you have seen?
5. Which source seems most convincing? Why?
6. Any other points of interest?

Task 7: The BUF Perspective

In your pairs, complete Task 7 using Sources H – K. You might want to divide the sources between you and then share information. Remember to provide evidence in your answers.

1. What was the atmosphere like amongst the BUF?
2. How would you describe the fascists attitude to violence?
3. According to the sources, what did the fascists think about the day of the march?
4. What other points of interest can you take from these sources?

Task 8: The Police Perspective

In your pairs, complete Task 8 using the report from Sir Phillip Game and the information about Bill Fishman on your Information Sheet. Again, consider dividing the tasks between you.

1. What were police trying to achieve?
2. Why did protesters become angry with police?
3. Why might police officers describe the day differently from protesters?
4. What do you notice about the number of arrests and who was arrested?
5. Do the numbers of arrests show whose side the police might have been on?

Task 9: Newspaper Reporting

Study the newspaper reports shown on the PowerPoint and read the information about each of the newspapers on your Information Sheet, then answer the questions below. Remember to explain your answers.

1. Which headline sounds victorious? How so?
2. Which sounds defensive? How so?
3. Did everybody interpret the day in the same way? Why not?

Task 10: Reaching a conclusion

You have looked at a wide range of evidence from a variety of perspectives, so how confident can you be about what actually happened during the Battle of Cable Street? Complete the statements below, providing some evidence for what you write after each one.

- We know...
- We think...
- We cannot be certain about...

Task 11

You are going to hear a song called “Cable Street”. It was recorded in 2019 by the folk trio The Young’uns as part of their stage show *The Ballad of Johnny Longstaff*. The voice you will hear in the song is that of Johnny Longstaff, an anti-fascist who was at Cable Street and later fought in the Spain against Franco’s fascists, aged just 17.

As you listen, make notes on anything that you hear which you *already* had knowledge of (so this is further support for that knowledge). Also, make notes of anything that you *did not* already know (so demonstrating that historians can always find out new information).

Things I already knew:

New information: