

Assembly Activity: Where in History do you Stand?

10-15 minutes

Goal: Pupils experience the scale of history and ancestry by lining up as a living “ancestor line,” seeing how close in generations familiar historical periods really are.

1. Preparation

- Note: Each pupil represents one generation back.
Parents = 1, grandparents = 2, great grandparents = 3.
- Decide how many pupils will take part: whole school, or one class as demonstrators.
20 pupils will reach the Tudors (~500 years ago), 40 the Norman Conquest (~1,000 years ago), 180 the Pyramids (~4,600 years ago) and the stone age in Britain.
- **Optional:** Prepare simple signs or props for the historical stops (e.g. crown for Tudors, laurel wreath for Romans). Especially if you want to take a photo of the line.
- **Optional:** Project the prepared slide showing the timeline milestones, so the audience can follow along. Also from tinyurl.com/linebehindyou

2. Instructions for the assembly leader

Step 1 – Set the scene & line them up

- Ask for the group who will take part (one class, several classes, or the whole school) to come to the front.
- Get them to form a single-file line across the hall, shoulder to shoulder, facing the audience.
- Put one pupil right at the front and say:
 - o “This is YOU.”
- Then say to everyone else:
 - o “Each of you is one generation — about 25 years. Generation 1 is your parents. Generation 2 is your grandparents. Generation 3 is your great-grandparents. And so on.”
 - o Imagine you are the parent of the person in front of you, and the child of the person behind you. Together you are one long family, stretching back through time.”
- Add: “For this activity, we’ll keep the maths simple: one generation = 25 years. So 4 steps = 100 years, 40 steps = 1,000 years.”
(In the book it’s 27 years, which is closer to reality — so the exact numbers don’t quite match.)

Step 2 – Line them up & start counting

- “Call out your number as I point to the first 10 of you. After 10, we will stop counting individually — I will call the tens, and everyone echoes.”
- Give the milestones as they come up:
 - o **1** → “One step back — your **parents**.”
 - o **2** → “Two steps back — your **grandparents**.”
 - o **3-4** → “Three or four back — your great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents live through **World War II**.”

- o **7** → “Seven back — the **Victorians**. Some of your family travel by steam train or write with quills.”
- o **10** → “Ten back — about 250 years ago. The start of the Industrial Revolution, with the **first factories**: cotton mills powered by water.
- o “From here, we’ll move more quickly, 10 or more at a time”
- o “Everyone together now, repeat after me”
- o **“20 generations — about 500 years!”** (hall echoes)
- o “Twenty back — your family are living in **Tudor** times. Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, and Shakespeare writing his plays.”
- o **“30 generations — about 750 years!”** (hall echoes)
- o **“40 generations — about 1000 years!”** (hall echoes)
- o “Forty back — your family see castles rising, knights riding to battle, the **Norman Conquest.**”
- o “Before that, Britain has waves of Vikings and Anglo Saxons arriving to settle for 10 to 20 generations. Most of your ancestors are farmers, but a few trade, raid, or carve runes into rock to mark their presence.”
- o **“80 generations — about 2000 years!”** (hall echoes)
- o “About 80 people back — the **Romans** arrive in Britain. First Julius Ceasar raids. Later Claudius conquers. After that, the Romans build roads, baths, and villas. Any of your family in Britain between 65 to 80 generations back is living in Roman Britain.”
- o **“100 generations — around 2500 years!”** (hall echoes)
- o “100 people back — **Ancient Greece**. The first Olympic Games, temples to the gods, and famous thinkers like Plato and Aristotle.”
- o “Meanwhile, here in Britain, 100 generations back is the middle of the Iron Age. Your family might live in a hillfort, inside a tribal kingdom.”
- o **“180 generations — around 4500 years!”**
- o “180 people back, and the Ancient Egyptians are building the **Great Pyramid of Giza**. Remember: Julius Ceasar lived closer to the iPhone than the pyramids being built.”
- o “Meanwhile, at the same time in Britain, it’s the very start of the **Bronze age**. Your family might help raise Stonehenge, build burial barrows, or make the first bronze tools”
- o **“Beyond 180 generations, and Britain is in the Stone Age.**
A few farms appear toward the end, but for most of this stretch your ancestors are hunter-gatherers — no writing, no villages. Homo sapiens go back 300,000 years, which is about 12,000 generations. Homo erectus goes back 2million years, which is 80,000 generations.”

3. Closing reflection

Bring everyone’s attention back to the front of the line: “And here you are — standing at the very front. Behind you, every step is a real person, living their own life. Not just Romans, or Egyptians, or Victorians in a history book — but your real-life ancestors, who worked, laughed, worried, and dreamed. All of history — even the pyramids, even the Vikings — is just a line of people behind us. You are the newest link in that very long chain.”

4. Optional extensions

- **Props:** simple signs or symbols (e.g. crown for Tudors, laurel wreath for Romans, pyramid drawing for Egypt).
- **Maths link:** count by 25s as you move down the line. Can we quickly convert places in the lines to dates, or vice-versa?
- **Quick prompt for PSHE:** “Turn to a partner: What do you think your ancestor at this point in the line worried about? What would they be proud of you for today?”

5. Numbers, using simplified 25 years / generation

Maths note for leaders: In the hall, tell pupils you're using **25 years per generation** for easy counting. The book uses **27** for realism, so exact numbers differ slightly.

Topic (typical KS1/KS2 coverage)	Approx. dates	Years ago	Generations back	Assembly stop
💣 World War II	1939–1945 CE	86–80	≈3	3
🚂 Victorians (UK)	1837–1901 CE	188–124	5–8	7
🏭 Industrial Revolution (Britain)	1760–1840 CE	265–185	7–11	10
👑 Stuarts	1603–1714 CE	422–311	12–17	15
👑 Tudors	1485–1603 CE	540–422	17–22	20
🏰 Medieval (anchor: Norman Conquest)	1066 CE	959	≈38	40
⚔️ Vikings in/near Britain	793–1066 CE	1232–959	38–50	50
ƿ Anglo-Saxons in Britain	410–1066 CE	1615–959	38–65	55
🦅 Romans in Britain	43–410 CE	1982–1615	65–80	70
🏛️ Ancient Greece (Archaic–Hellenistic)	800–300 BCE	2825–2325	94–114	100
▲ Ancient Egypt (New Kingdom focus)	1550–1070 BCE	3575–3095	124–144	135
🏺 Ancient Egypt (Old Kingdom)	2686–2181 BCE	4711–4206	170–190	180
⚒️ Iron Age Britain	800 BCE–43 CE	2825–1982	80–113	100
𨱓 Bronze Age Britain	2500–800 BCE	4525–2825	113–180	150
🗿 Stone Age Britain (late: Mesolithic→Neolithic)	12,000–2,500 BCE	14,025–4,525	180–560	>180