

Britain in 1950

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Britain in 1950 was different, in many ways, from Britain today. The most obvious difference was in the physical fabric of the country. In 1950 the legacy of the Second World War was still everywhere to be seen. In the major cities, and particularly in London, there were vacant bomb-sites, unrepaired houses, temporary prefabs and gardens turned into allotments. The countryside was peppered with wartime military bases, many now abandoned, others reactivated in response to the Cold War.

British society was still strongly influenced by war. Most grandfathers had served in the First World War, most fathers in the Second, and most young men were currently called up for two years of National Service. Boys mimicked the militarism of their elders, using army surplus equipment to fight mock battles with the Germans. The armed services occupied a far more prominent role in British life than they do today. There were four times as many servicemen in the early 1950s as there are today. A majority of them were conscripts, who were variously elated, bored or appalled by their experiences. Many servicemen served abroad, especially in Germany or the Empire. 750 soldiers were killed and many more injured or captured during the Korean war of 1950-53.

In 1950 Britain spent 6.6 per cent of its GDP on defence: more than any major country except the Soviet Union. The Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force were second in size and power only to the forces of the United States, and in 1952 Britain became the world's third nuclear power when it detonated an atomic bomb off the coast of Australia.

Britain was a militarised country, yet until October 1951 it was governed by a Labour party traditionally opposed to militarism. The massive Labour majority at the 1945 general election was largely removed at the 1950 election, but support for Labour remained strong. The party was helped by a high turnout – 84 per cent in 1950 (compared with under 72 per cent in 1997) and strong support from the trade unions. Very low unemployment helped ensure that over half of all male workers and nearly a quarter of all women workers were trade unionists. Yet strikes were illegal until 1951 and the Labour government took tough action to prevent any interference with food supplies or exports. At the 1951 general election, the Tories won a small parliamentary majority, despite the fact that Labour got more votes and its highest ever proportion of the total vote. The Conservative revival was helped by the collapse of the Liberal vote, the heating up of the Cold War (which increased government expenditure) and by growing frustration with the continuation of austerity and controls.

A decade of war and its political and financial legacies had left Britain with a plethora of state regulations and high taxation. Some basic commodities like butter, meat, tea and coal were still rationed and although bread was now freely available, the de-rationing of sweets and chocolates in 1949 had to be abandoned because demand was too great. The continuance of rationing encouraged people to produce their own food in back gardens and allotments – just as they had in the war – or to get food parcels from relatives abroad. There were also severe shortages of most consumer products, which prompted the continuance of the wartime 'make-do-and-mend' culture. The standard rate of income tax was nine shillings in the pound

– more than twice the rate today. Consequently most Britons had little surplus money and even less to spend it on. The austerity and bureaucracy of British post-war life was brilliantly satirised in George Orwell's 1949 novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The combination of war damage and a scarcity of manpower and materials created a serious urban housing problem. The Labour government wanted to pull down the slums and move their occupants either to new council flats or out of the cities altogether. The New Towns Act of 1946 led to the expansion of towns around London, like Harlow, to take the capital's overspill population and to the creation of new industrial centres, like Peterlee in county Durham. But the new towns were still in their infancy in 1950, and local authorities lacked the resources to overcome the housing shortage. Nearly half the population lived in private rented accommodation – often in dingy rooms or bedsits with little privacy, comfort or warmth. Less than a third of all houses were owner occupied – half the proportion in the late twentieth century. The vast majority of buildings were still traditional in character and construction and were built of brick or stone. There were virtually no high rise buildings and concrete was only widely used for military structures. All this changed rapidly in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Britain was the most urbanised and industrialised country in the world and consequently one of the most polluted. The reliance on coal for both residential heating and energy generation resulted in chronic atmospheric pollution which was harmful both to people and to buildings. The London smog of 1952 lasted five days and killed more than 4,000 people from heart and lung diseases. In industrial areas, factories polluted not only the air but also the waterways, while mines and spoil tips scarred the landscape. The degraded industrial environment of the postwar era was illustrated in L.S. Lowry's paintings of urban Lancashire.

Environmental pollution was the price Britain paid for its industrial success. In 1950 the United Kingdom accounted for a quarter of world trade in manufactures – a higher proportion than before the Second World War and far greater than today. This was facilitated by both the temporary dislocation of Britain's continental rivals and the government's policy of prioritising export production for currency reasons. Britain was the foremost world producer of ships and the leading European producer of coal, steel, cars and textiles. Science-based industries like electronics and engineering were growing rapidly, as were oil and chemical refining. Britain led the field in civilian aviation with the first jet liner (the Comet) and other more successful aircraft. Rolls Royce was a worldwide symbol of excellence in aero and motor engines. Even the long ailing textile industry was revived by the introduction of synthetic fibres like nylon. In 1950, Leicester – centre of the hosiery trade – was the most prosperous city, *per capita*, in Europe.

The Labour government intervened in the running of the economy to an unprecedented extent. It nationalised the coal mines, the railways, the inland waterways, gas and electricity, the airways, the Bank of England and the iron and steel industry. By the early 1950s, state owned industries employed over two million people – most of them in coal or rail. Coal was still the main source of heating and energy and provided most of the fuel and much of the freight for the railways. Coal production was hindered by a shortage of miners and investment, but was twice the level of the mid-1980s and far greater than today.

Although the great majority of British people lived and worked in urban or industrial areas, most of the land mass of Britain was still predominantly rural and agricultural in character.

Farming was largely mixed – both arable and pastoral – and avoided intensive cultivation methods. Birds and other kinds of wildlife were far more common than today because there were far more hedgerows and far less use of chemicals. Farmers' incomes were boosted by the 1947 Agriculture Act which provided subsidies for cereal production and livestock. Tractors had largely replaced horses, but most farmers still employed poorly paid agricultural labourers, many of whom lived in tied cottages. The picturesque character of the countryside – so admired by contemporary guidebooks – often reflected the poverty of its residents. Many rural homes lacked modern facilities like water sanitation, and electricity, while few had telephones. The isolation of country life encouraged hostility to incomers and mental depression which sometimes resulted in violence. Rural areas were also at risk from bad weather. In 1952 river flooding at Lynmouth led to many deaths and in 1953 a combination of storms and a high tide inundated the coast of Essex and East Anglia leaving hundreds of people dead in the worst peacetime disaster in modern Britain.

The population, which totalled about 50 million in 1950, was overwhelmingly indigenous. The 1951 census showed that only 3 per cent of the population had been born overseas and the great majority of the immigrants were white and European. The largest immigrant group – over half a million – were the Irish, who made a major contribution to both the post-war rebuilding of Britain and the staffing of the National Health Service. Other immigrants had come to Britain as refugees from the Nazis and the Second World War – including over 160,000 Poles and Jews from central Europe. There was also an influx from Italy and Cyprus. The first post-war immigrants from Jamaica had arrived in Britain, on board the *Empire Windrush* in 1948, but there were still fewer than 140,000 blacks and Asians in Britain in 1951. They were sometimes derided as 'wogs' and – like many white immigrants – suffered discrimination in employment and housing, but were generally tolerated because of the scarcity of labour and their sporting prowess. In 1950, the West Indies cricket team won a Test series in England for the first time and, in so doing, popularised calypso music in Britain.

Britain's position as the head of a multi-racial Empire and Commonwealth influenced the government's immigration policy. The 1948 British Nationality Act confirmed unrestricted entry to Commonwealth citizens – a far cry from the more restrictive policy adopted in the later twentieth century. The Empire was still of great political, military and economic importance. Although India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon had recently been granted independence, in Africa, South-East Asia and the West Indies it was still intact, as was much of Britain's informal empire in the Middle East. Ties with the Empire were cemented by trade, large-scale emigration from Britain to the 'white' dominions and also by the monarchy. Princess Elizabeth was in Kenya when she succeeded to the throne in 1952 and her coronation had a strongly imperial flavour. Dented by the 1936 abdication crisis, the monarchy had recovered its prestige thanks to its patriotic wartime role and the dutiful conduct of the royal family. The sudden death of George VI in 1952 induced genuine national mourning and large crowds attended his lying-in-state.

Britain, like its empire, was multi-racial and multi-cultural, for differences of nationality, locality, class and gender had prevented the emergence of a homogenised national identity and culture. Both in Scotland and in Wales, vocal minorities demanded greater autonomy from England. In 1950 Scots Nationalists removed 'the stone of destiny' – a symbol of Scottish sovereignty – from Westminster Abbey, while a campaign for a Welsh Parliament attracted considerable support. Yet in both Scotland and Wales nationalism had a very limited appeal,

partly because it was undermined by centrifugal economic forces and regional tensions. The English-speaking industrial population of south Wales had little in common with the Welsh-speaking ruralists of the west and north, while the industrial and partly Catholic proletariat of Glasgow felt no kinship with the Edinburgh or Presbyterian elites.

In England, the Second World War had revived a sense of Englishness which was reflected, for example, in Nikolaus Pevsner's lectures on 'The Englishness of English Art' and the series of books on English heritage published by Collins. But many writers feared that traditional English culture was being rapidly undermined. Evelyn Waugh lamented the decline of the aristocratic country house, while John Betjeman mourned the loss of regional individuality in the face of modernisation and mechanisation. Yet there remained strong regional divisions within England, most notably between north and south. Northerners had not only their own way of speaking, but also their own sense of humour, neither of which were often heard on the BBC, which, from its headquarters in London, propagated the standard southern version of received pronunciation.

Class divisions were clearly reflected in how people dressed, as well as how they spoke. Working men wore caps and clothes appropriate for manual labour, while middle-class men were distinguished by their white collars, suits and hats. There was a similar, but less rigid, division between working women who wore scarves on their heads and middle-class women who wore hats. Class divisions were also apparent in the educational system and not just in the divide between state schools (which taught the great majority) and private schools (which catered for a wealthy minority). The 1944 Education Act had created a binary system of secondary education at 'eleven plus'. Most children went to secondary modern schools which they left, at the age of fifteen, with few or no qualifications. Those who went to grammar schools stayed on a little longer and got qualifications, but few went on to higher education. Only a small proportion of young people went to university and most were middle-class males who had often been privately educated.

In 1950 far fewer women were in paid employment than today. Women were generally not expected to have proper careers, but to seek short-term employment before they married and had children. After the war, many young women gave up paid work and raised a family at home. They benefited from some labour-saving electrical appliances like washing machines and vacuum cleaners, but still spent much of their time on domestic chores like cooking, washing and cleaning. Scrubbing and polishing were *de rigueur* and entailed much physical energy. Open fires were still the standard form of residential heating and required regular attention. Few homes had a refrigerator, so fresh products were regularly obtained from local shops or market stalls.

Most shops were family businesses and traditional in character. The butcher, for example, wore a straw hat and a striped apron, used a thick wooden chopping block and sprinkled sawdust on the floor. The local shopping parade usually included a butcher, a baker, a grocer, a greengrocer, a confectioner and an ironmonger, so there was little necessity to go further afield for everyday purchases. High street chains, like Sainsbury's, were increasingly popular because they provided good quality and low prices, but self-service supermarkets in the American style were only just beginning to be introduced.

The health of the nation was much better in 1950 than it had been before. Full employment ensured that people were better fed than in the 1930s, while the young actually benefited

from the lack of fat during the war. The creation of the free National Health Service, in 1946, improved the quality of medical care, especially for the elderly, women and the poor, but the cost of the new system soon led to the introduction of charges for dentistry and prescriptions. The improvement in national health also owed much to the introduction of antibiotics which gradually eradicated many diseases, like tuberculosis, which had been major killers. However, the incidence of poliomyelitis increased until 1951 and many children were disabled by it before a vaccine was developed. There was also a rapid increase in cancer, strokes and especially heart disease: the three major killers of Britons in the later twentieth century. The achievement of Britain's postwar 'Welfare State' should not be exaggerated. By 1950 Britain's combined expenditure on health care and social security was lower than that of war devastated West Germany and it soon slipped behind that of most western European countries.

Public attitudes towards sex and marriage still remained strongly conservative. Abortions were illegal, so back street practitioners flourished. Illegitimacy rates were far lower than today, partly because there was still a social stigma attached to single mothers and their offspring. Consequently unwanted babies were often given away for adoption or sent to institutions, either in Britain or in the Empire. The divorce rate had increased sharply in the 1940s – because of the war and a relaxation of the law – but in 1950 it was still less than a fifth of that today. Divorce was still not acceptable in many circles including royalty, the 'respectable' middle classes and those who could not afford such an expensive luxury. Sexual relations were generally much more covert than today and there was virtually no formal sex education either for children or for adults. Nevertheless the attraction of sex was clearly apparent both in advertising (especially for films, books and clothes) and on the streets where prostitutes openly solicited for business until the 1959 Street Offences Act. Those whose sexual behaviour deviated from the heterosexual norm had to adopt a low profile for fear of legal prosecution or social persecution.

The recreations of the British people in 1950 were generally more simple and more localised than they are today. Many older or poorer people were content to chat with their neighbours, walk the dog or have a pint at the local. Pubs had much more limited opening times than today, especially on Sundays, when shops were also shut and there were no commercial sporting fixtures. Sunday was still essentially Victorian in character – a day for a large family dinner, quiet relaxation and religious worship. Church attendance, though lower than before the war, remained high, particularly with Catholics, the young and the elderly. On Saturday nights unmarried young adults often patronised the local dance hall or cinema, but few went further afield for entertainment. Popular music was pre-'rock and roll', but was already dominated by American styles and performers. Popular fashion, however, was less influenced by America and the 'Teddy boys' were a distinctively British phenomenon. Young women welcomed the long full skirts of the 'New Look' as a reaction to wartime austerity and loved the new nylon stockings, which were very hard to obtain. Many children and teenagers belonged to voluntary associations like the Scouts and Guides, the Boys Brigade and church groups. They provided practical skills, a code of morality and inexpensive outings and holidays.

Primary schools had to cope with the post-war 'baby boom' – and classes of nearly fifty were common in urban areas. Nevertheless most children quickly acquired a basic proficiency in the 'three Rs' with the aid of traditional teaching methods and simple aids like reading cards

and 'Beacon books'. Most schools had been built in the late Victorian period and had changed little since then. Out of school, children played in the streets, rather than in their overcrowded homes. They liked simple games like hopscotch, marbles and conkers, as well as football and cricket. Children also loved boiled sweets, chocolate, liquorice and sherbert – which they washed down with sweet soft drinks like 'Tizer, the appetizer'. Children's clothes were distinctively different from those of adults: shorts for boys and short skirts or tunics for girls. On their feet they wore short or long socks with shoes, sandals or canvas plimsolls. Most children walked to school and, like their parents, used public transport for longer journeys.

1950 was a golden age for public transport. On the roads, one out of every three vehicles was a bus or lorry. In the cities, worn out trams were being replaced by electric trolleybuses and petrol buses, which provided cheap and frequent services. Motor freight was increasing, but house-to-house deliveries of milk and coal and refuse collections by the 'rag-and-bone man' were still made by horse-and-cart. Consequently horse dung and water troughs were still common sights. Car sales were boosted by the end of petrol rationing in 1950, but there was still only one car per sixteen people. Few families could afford a car, so a motorbike with a sidecar was a popular and cheaper alternative. Bicycles were widely used, both for short journeys to work or shop and for long distance recreation. Most people used trains for long journeys. The railway network reached to almost every part of the country for most branch lines were still in operation. Nationalisation of the railways in 1947 had ended internal competition, but the three class fare system was preserved along with exclusive luxury trains on prestige routes. The railways still fascinated children who loved trainspotting, playing with Hornby model train sets and reading the Reverend Awdry's railway engine stories. The annual family holiday was generally taken by rail – even on rails in the case of camping coaches.

Holidays with pay were now supported by legislation and about half the population spent a holiday by the sea. The early 1950s were the mass-market heyday of the English seaside resort – before the development of the cheap package holiday to the Continent. Most people stayed in small guest houses, or in holiday camps and caravan parks. Traditional pier attractions like the peep-shows and live shows remained popular, as did seaside fare like shellfish, rock and candyfloss. But the beaches were the great attraction and those of popular resorts like Brighton would be covered, on summer bank holidays, with a closely packed mass of bodies and deck chairs. Sea swimming was also popular, partly because there was considered to be less risk of infection than in the overcrowded swimming pools. The well-off middle classes preferred to holiday abroad and over a million Britons did so in 1950, despite currency restrictions and a recent devaluation of the pound.

The British media in 1950 were still dominated by the press. The national newspapers – all published around Fleet Street – were dominated by autocratic press barons and restrictive print unions. The leading popular paper, the *Daily Mirror*, had a circulation four times that of the leading quality paper, the *Daily Telegraph*, but the largest sales were achieved by the popular Sunday papers, like the *News of the World*, which trawled the divorce courts for salacious stories. Newspapers were a far more important source of news than they are today, because news reports by the BBC were subject to various restrictions. For most people, the BBC meant its domestic radio services, which mixed the pre-war Reithian concept of respectable public service broadcasting with new, more subversive, forms of entertainment. These included new drama (like *Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas), adventure thrillers (such as *Dick Barton Special Agent*) and comedy (notably *The Goon Show*). The Light Programme

featured popular music and the Third Programme classical music, but new records could only be heard on foreign stations like Radio Luxembourg. The BBC had resumed television broadcasts after the war, but the audience was still small because the receivers were expensive and unreliable, while the programmes were made in studios and could not be copied.

Visual entertainment for the masses was principally provided by films. In 1950 there were nearly 5,000 cinemas in Britain which attracted an audience four times larger than that in the 1970s. The early 1950s was a golden age for British films, with directors like David Lean and Carol Reed and producers like Michael Balcon, whose Ealing comedies brilliantly reflected the social character and physical environment of post-war Britain. The era was also a golden age for children's comics, both humorous British strips like *Beano* and *Dandy* and American comics with action heroes like Superman, Batman and Captain Marvel. Two new distinguished British comics were *Eagle*, which catered for middle-class boys and the growing taste for Science Fiction and its sister publication, *Girl*, which provided more traditional fare about boarding schools and ballet dancing. Children's book literature was also largely traditional in character, with pre-war classics like *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *Billy Bunter* retaining their popularity. The most prolific and successful children's writer of the period was Enid Blyton, whose most popular character, Noddy, first appeared in 1949.

The national mood and character was epitomised by the 1951 Festival of Britain, sponsored by the Labour government as a symbol of Britain's post-war revival, which celebrated national achievements from science, manufacturing and housing, to the arts and recreation. Yet, as Dylan Thomas noted, people liked the festival not because it was nationalistic or educational, but because it was 'magical and parochial', with whimsical touches like Emmett's nonsense machines. The Dome of Discovery inspired, fifty years later, the Millennium Dome, which was supported by a Labour government that included Peter Mandelson, whose grandfather, Herbert Morrison, had championed the 1951 festival.

Many people today regard post-war Britain, nostalgically, as the golden age of the Welfare State. Opinion poll evidence does suggest that in 1950 Britons were generally happier, perhaps because they had more security and less stress in their personal and professional lives. Nevertheless they were, on average, much less well off than today and many lived in mean and straightened circumstances. Those who were better off were already adopting the material trappings and social trends which characterise British society now. In 1950 Britons generally accepted their lot, but – just like us – they wanted the future to be even better.

For Further Reading:

Jeremy Black, *Modern British History since 1900* (Macmillan, 2000); Terry Gourvish and Alan O'Day (eds.), *Britain since 1945* (Macmillan, 1991); Arthur Marwick, *British Society since 1945* (3rd edition, Penguin, 1996); David Gladstone, *The Twentieth Century Welfare State* (Macmillan, 1999); Ross McKibbin, *Classes and cultures: England 1918-51* (Oxford, 1998); Paul Johnson (ed.) *Twentieth Century Britain: Economic Social and Cultural Change* (Longman, 1994); Mary Banham and Bevis Hillier (eds.), *A Tonic To The Nation, The Festival of Britain 1951* (Thames & Hudson, 1976).

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