**V UNIT**

**Victorian era**, in [British history, the period between approximately 1820 and 1914](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Kingdom/Early-and-mid-Victorian-Britain#ref44919), corresponding roughly but not exactly to the period of [Queen Victoria](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Victoria-queen-of-United-Kingdom)’s reign (1837–1901) and characterized by a class-based society, a growing number of people able to vote, a growing state and economy, and [Britain’s](https://www.britannica.com/place/United-Kingdom) status as the most powerful [empire](https://www.britannica.com/place/British-Empire) in the world.

During the [Victorian period](https://www.britannica.com/science/Dionysian-period), Britain was a powerful nation with a rich [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture). It had a stable government, a growing state, and an expanding franchise. It also controlled a large empire, and it was wealthy, in part because of its degree of industrialization and its imperial holdings and in spite of the fact that three-fourths or more of its population was working-class. Late in the period, Britain began to decline as a global political and economic power relative to other major powers, particularly the United States, but this decline was not acutely noticeable until after [World War II](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II).

[**Religion**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion)**And**[**Science**](https://www.britannica.com/science/history-of-science)**In The Victorian Era**

Most Victorian Britons were Christian. The [Anglican churches](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Anglicanism) of [England](https://www.britannica.com/place/England/People#ref44518), [Wales](https://www.britannica.com/place/Wales/Climate#ref226288), and [Ireland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ireland/Ethnic-groups-language-and-religion#ref234218) were the state churches (of which the monarch was the [nominal](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nominal) head) and dominated the religious landscape (even though the majority of Welsh and Irish people were members of other churches). The [Church of Scotland](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Church-of-Scotland) was [Presbyterian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/presbyterian). There was some religious [diversity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diversity), as Britain also was home to other non-Anglican Protestants (notably [Methodists](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Methodism)), [Roman Catholics](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism), [Jews](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Judaism), [Muslims](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam), [Hindus](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hinduism), and others (at the end of the period there were even a few [atheists](https://www.britannica.com/topic/atheism)).

Alongside their faith, Victorians made and appreciated developments in science. The best-known Victorian scientific development is that of the theory of [evolution](https://www.britannica.com/science/evolution-scientific-theory). It is typically credited to [Charles Darwin](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Darwin), but versions of it were developed by earlier thinkers as well, and the pseudoscience of [eugenics](https://www.britannica.com/science/eugenics-genetics) was an ugly outgrowth of Victorian evolutionary theory. Victorians were also fascinated by the emerging [discipline](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline) of [psychology](https://www.britannica.com/science/psychology) and by the physics of energy.

**Government And Politics In The Victorian Era**

The formal [political system](https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-system) was a [constitutional monarchy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/constitutional-monarchy). It was in practice dominated by aristocratic men. The British constitution was (and is) unwritten and consists of a combination of written laws and unwritten conventions. At the national level, government consisted of the monarch and the two houses of [Parliament](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Parliament), the [House of Lords](https://www.britannica.com/topic/House-of-Lords) and the [House of Commons](https://www.britannica.com/topic/House-of-Commons-British-government). The monarchs during this period were [Queen Victoria](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Victoria-queen-of-United-Kingdom) (1837–1901), preceded by [King George IV](https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-IV) (1820–30) and [King William IV](https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-IV-king-of-Great-Britain) (1830–37) and followed by [King Edward VII](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edward-VII) (1901–10) and [King George V](https://www.britannica.com/biography/George-V-king-of-United-Kingdom) (1910–36). During the Victorian period, the [House of Commons](https://www.britannica.com/topic/House-of-Commons-British-government) became the centre of government, the House of Lords lost power (though it remained influential until the [Parliament Act of 1911](https://www.britannica.com/event/Parliament-Act-of-1911)), and the monarchy transformed into a symbol of the nation. The House of Commons consisted of about 600 men called members of Parliament (MPs), who were elected to represent the counties and boroughs of [England](https://www.britannica.com/place/England), [Scotland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Scotland), [Wales](https://www.britannica.com/place/Wales), and [Ireland](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ireland). England had many more representatives than the other three nations, by virtue of its status as first among these four equals, the product of tradition as well as its greater political power and wealth. The upper house, the [House of Lords](https://www.britannica.com/topic/House-of-Lords), was populated principally by several hundred noblemen who had life [tenures](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tenures). Members of both houses were wealthy men. Formal national politics was dominated by two major parties, the [Liberal Party](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Liberal-Party-political-party-United-Kingdom) and the [Conservative (or Tory) Party](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Conservative-Party-political-party-United-Kingdom).

At the start of the period, MPs were elected by the half-million property-owning men (in a population of 21 million) who had the vote. In 1829 the [vote was granted to Catholic men](https://www.britannica.com/event/Catholic-Emancipation) and in 1832, to most middle-class men; in 1867 and 1884 the franchise was extended to working-class men. Most women over age 30 got the right to vote in 1918. Full adult [suffrage](https://www.britannica.com/topic/suffrage), with no property requirement, was achieved with the second [Representation of the People Act](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Representation-of-the-People-Acts) (1928). This story of the expansion of the national electorate is important, but there is more to political participation than voting at the national level. Local politics were also important. And being denied a voice and access to institutions certainly did not render nonvoters indifferent to politics or to how power was wielded; they made their opinions on these known via demonstrations, petitions, and pamphlets.

Important political events during this period included the [abolition](https://www.britannica.com/topic/abolitionism-European-and-American-social-movement) of [slavery](https://www.britannica.com/topic/slavery-sociology) in the British Empire; the expansions of the franchise; working-class political activism, most notably [Chartism](https://www.britannica.com/event/Chartism-British-history); the rise of [liberalism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/liberalism) as the dominant [political ideology](https://www.britannica.com/topic/ideology-society), especially of the middle class; and the nationalization of [Conservative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Conservative) and Liberal parties (and the emergence of the British [Labour Party](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Labour-Party-political-party) in 1906). The growth of the state and state intervention were seen in major acts that limited hours for factory workers and miners, in [public health](https://www.britannica.com/topic/public-health) acts, and in the provision of [elementary education](https://www.britannica.com/topic/elementary-education) by the state. Political conflicts between Ireland and Britain and the rise of Irish [nationalism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nationalism) were also hallmarks of the era, as were women’s rights activism, which resulted in the [Married Women’s Property Acts](https://www.britannica.com/event/Married-Womens-Property-Acts-United-States-1839), the repeal of the [Contagious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Contagious) Diseases Acts, and the growth of education and employment options for women.

**The Victorian British Economy**

Britain’s status as a world political power was [bolstered](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bolstered) by a strong economy, which grew rapidly between 1820 and 1873. This half-century of growth was followed by an economic [depression](https://www.britannica.com/topic/depression-economics) and from 1896 until 1914 by a modest recovery. With the earliest phases of industrialization over by about 1840, the British economy expanded. Britain became the richest country in the world, but many people worked long hours in harsh conditions. Yet, overall, standards of living were rising. While the 1840s were a bad time for workers and the poor—they were dubbed “the hungry forties”—overall the trend was toward a less precarious life. Most families not only had a home and enough to eat but also had something leftover for [alcohol](https://www.britannica.com/topic/alcoholic-beverage), [tobacco](https://www.britannica.com/plant/common-tobacco), and even vacations to the countryside or the seaside. Of course, some decades were times of plenty, others of want. Relative prosperity meant that Britain was a nation not only of shopkeepers but of shoppers (with the rise of the [department store](https://www.britannica.com/topic/department-store) from mid-century transforming the shopping experience). Increased wealth, including higher real wages from the 1870s, meant that even working-class people could purchase discretionary items. Mass production meant that clothes, souvenirs, newspapers, and more were affordable to almost everyone.

**Victorian Culture And Art**

More access made British cultural products more important. Not only did they reveal much about the society from which they emerged, but during the Victorian period Britain was the cultural capital of the English-speaking world (including the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). Victorian performance and print culture were rich and varied, a blend of melodrama, spectacle, and [morality](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/morality).

Theatre thrived. [Melodrama](https://www.britannica.com/art/melodrama)—which featured evil villains, virtuous heroines, and intricate plots—was the most important and most popular [genre](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/genre) early on; later, sensation drama became popular. Even more popular were [music halls](https://www.britannica.com/art/music-hall-and-variety), which featured varied programs of singing, dancing, sketches, and more; these emerged in the 1850s, and by the 1870s there were hundreds across Britain, some seating thousands of people. Music halls attracted people of all classes.

Print culture was also large and diverse, aided by relatively high literacy rates. There were hundreds of magazines and newspapers available at ever cheaper prices. The 1880s saw the emergence of “the New Journalism,” which drew in readers with pieces on violent crimes and scandals in high society. Novels were another key feature of Victorian print culture. By mid-century, Britons of all classes could afford and read novels. Some were aimed at highly educated and well-off people, others at less-educated readers looking for appealing and exciting stories. Penny dreadfuls and sensation novels, seen at their best in the work of [Wilkie Collins](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Wilkie-Collins), thrilled their readers. Victorian novels were often quite long, with complicated plots (often centred on marriages) and many characters. Many, especially those by [Charles Dickens](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Dickens-British-novelist), are still read today.

**Victorian Age**

The reign of Queen Victoria is the longest one of English history (from 1837 until 1901) and it represents a period of expansion, prosperity, industrial development and scientific and technical progress. England enjoyed several decades of unequalled wealth and power, and a new wave of optimism began to sweep over the country.

**An age of reforms**

During his short reign (1832-37), King William IV started an age of reforms:

* The Reform Act (1832) abolished rotten boroughs and changed the electoral system, in fact all male members of the middle classes had the right to vote;
* The Factory Act (1833) forbade children exploitation: children couldn't be employed more then 48 hours a week. This law wasn't succesful to protect adult workers too, until the Ten Hours Act of 1847.

In 1837 William IV died and his young niece Victoria succeeded him to the throne. She became soon very popular because of her strong sense of duty and her simplicity. She was beloved expecially by the middle class, who shared her moral and and religious views and admired her respectable and decent code of behaviour, known as "Victorianism".  
Queen Victoria led her reign to democracy: she reigned constitutionally and avoided the revolutionary movements that characterized the other European countries in 1848. Her inexperience facilitated the British two-party system. The reign was politically administered by a series of great Prime Ministers: Peel and Disraeli among the Tories (Conservatives), Palmerston and Gladstone among the Whigs (Liberals).  
In 1867 the Liberals proposed the Second Reform Bill, who passed under Conservative Government, which gave the right of vote to the town labourers, but left the agricultural labourers and miners still enfranchised. Only in 1884, with the Third Reform Bill, the electorate was extended to all male workers. During 1892 the Independent Labour Party was founded and became in 1900 the Modern British Labour Party.  
During the first decade of Queen Victoria’s reign there were two main political tendencies:

Freedom of trade

In the fist decade of Victorian age, a strong movement for complete freedom of trade mobilised public opinion in favour of the abolition of protectionist laws on imports and exports. In fact protectionism seemed to be out-of-date: English economy needed some reforms, as political institution before.  
The movement of free trade asked also to repeal the Corn Laws, that had increased the price of corn. The reapel of the Corn Laws became reality with the Tory Prime Minister Robert Peel, who was forced by scarcity of food ("hungry forties") to abolish these laws.

Peel had to resign and the Tory party was split (1846).

Chartism

Chartism was a radical working-class movement, which expressed the popular discontent for the bad conditions of workers and the Reform Act, which had given the vote to so few.  
This movement wanted to give the workers more importance in the social and political life of the reign and to alleviate their misery.  
In fact, even if English economy had a leading position in the world economy, workers conditions had not improve. Factory legislation didn't protect workers and social evils, like child labour, had not disappeared.

The second half of 19th Century is dominated in English politics by three important figures: William Gladstone, who was a liberal, and Benjamin Disraeli and Lord Salisbury, who were conservatives.  
During his ministry, Gladstone tried to find a solution to the Irish question through the sanctioning of equality between all the religions present in the island and through a system of peasant proprietorship in order to prevent an agrarian revolt. However, a tide of Irish nationalism broke out and asked "Home Rule", an Irish indipent governement.  
Also this period, from 1860 to 1901, is charactierized by social and political reforms:

* In 1870, the Elementary Education Act recognized the importance of primary schooling;
* In 1872, the Ballot Act secured secret vote at elections and the number of voters rose;
* Some others reforms improved public health and protected trade unions, so workers began to organize themselves to protect their rights and to help each other.

The political tendences were turning into democratic and socialist ideas. In fact, with the "Labour Representation Conference" in 1900, trade unionists and socialists, with the Fabian Society (an association of middle class intellectuals) agreed to support the election of Labour members in Paliament.  
In this period also the question of women's rights became important and some movements for women's emancipation and right to vote began to rise.

**The British Empire**

The loss of American colonies had made the idea of a futher Empire unpopular ontil the second half of XIX century.  
In 1850s Britain began to face the expansion of Russia in Asia, which was breaking the Ottoman Empire and repersented a threat for Turkey and for England, too. The British support of Turkey led to the War of Crimea (1853-56) between Russia on one side and Britain, France, Turkey and Sardinia on the other. The war ended with the defeat of Russia; however this last lost no territories and the only achievement of the allies was the preservation of Turkey.  
Another element of danger broke out in 1857, when the native soldiers threatened British rule in India. The Indian Revolt was solved with difficulty and was followed by an Act of Parliament which abolished the governement of East Indian Company and put the Governement of India directly in the hands of the Queen (in 1877 Queen Victoria became Empress of India)  
At the same time, Disraeli bought a large numer of shares of the Suez Canal to protect British routes to India. But when there sdtarted a political crisis because of the power of  Egyptian nationalists Britain invaded Egypt to protect its Imperial interests.  
Britain began his expansion in Africa: in 1884 the Kingdom invaded the Sudan and during 1899-1902 British won with difficulty the war in South Africa against the Boers (Dutchs) for the control of gold and diamonds. The war made Britain unpopular in Europe abroad and divided theing  public opinion at home:

* Many British citizen believed in th Empire and thought that imperial expansion would absorb excess goods, capital and population. Moreover they were proud of spreadindg thier civilized culture in the world.
* Britain discovered that every area of the Empire represented a danger the imperial ambitions were in contast with liberal ideas of the reign.

**Urbanization**

England passed from an agricultural country to an industrial one: this caused a migration of rural people to the industrial areas in search of jobs. It, combined with a relentless rise in population, carried to the situation that population in industrial cities as London, Liverpool and Manchester doubled and more people lived in towns and cities than in the countryside.  
People in cities lived in intolerable situation, in a bad sanitary condition that contributed to the diffusion of *typhus and cholera*. The city was associated with dirt, disease, unhealth, smells, noise, ...  
The poor lived in the slums, appalling quartiers characterized by squalor, crime and disease. They lived in bad conditions and worked in a bad and dangerous atmosphere. After cholera and TB epidemies was indtroducted a campaign to improve workers' quarters conditions: cities had to be cleaned up and professional medical organisation to be found.  
Victorian towns were also overcrowded (rented houses, row after row, no water, no light…)  
The development of industry didn't brought only disease, but also material benefits for the middle and upper classes. Sometimes we have also the growth of lower middle class, linked to the new forms of economic activity in banking, insurace and public service. In the late-century public transports, like tram and trains, developped and other services like gas, water and lightening were introducted. Personal higiene was made possible when running water began to be pumped into many British cities.  
Differences between middle classes and poor increased and children and woman continued to be expoilted. The conditions of life of the Victorian working people were still bleak, though varied foods and occasional pleasure.            In this period we have debates about poverty and the birth of social movements to protect working classes' conditions (denounce of inhumane workhouses).

20th century England

Britain changed hugely during the 20th century. Life for ordinary people was transformed and became much more comfortable.

**Liberal reforms in the early 20th century**

Life was hard for the working class at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1900 surveys showed that between 15% and 20% of the population were living at subsistence (bare survival) level. Worse between 8% and 10% of the population were living*below* subsistence level. These figures seem shocking to us but remember things had always been that way. Indeed earlier in history, things were worse. There had always been a large part of the population living at subsistence level or below it.

In 1906 a Liberal government was elected and they introduced a number of reforms. From 1906 local councils were allowed to provide free school meals. In 1907 school medical inspections began. In 1908 an act limited miners to working an 8 hour day. Then in 1909, the Trade Boards Act set up trade boards that fixed minimum wages in certain very low paid trades. Also in 1909, an Act set up labor exchanges to help the unemployed find work.

In 1908 an Old Age Pensions Act gave small pensions to people over 70. The pensions were hardly generous but they were a start. From 1925 pensions were paid to men over 65 and women over 60. Widows were also given pensions. In 1911 the National Insurance Act was passed. All employers and employees made contributions to a fund. If a worker was ill he was entitled to free treatment by a doctor. (Normally you had to pay and it was expensive). If he could not work because of illness the worker was given a small amount of money to live on. However, his family was *not* entitled to free medical treatment.

From 1911 workers in certain trades such as building and shipbuilding who frequently had periods of unemployment all contributed to a fund. If unemployed they could claim a small amount of money for a maximum of 15 weeks in any year. Again it was hardly generous but in 1920 the scheme was extended to most (not all) workers and they were given money for more than 15 weeks. By 1912 most people had Saturday afternoon off work. However, shop workers were usually forced to work all day on Saturday. An act of 1912 compensated them by stating they must have half a day off during the week.

Meanwhile in 1902 Balfour's Education Act created state secondary education. In the early 20th century the upper class went to public schools. The middle class went to fee-paying grammar schools and the working class went to elementary schools. From 1907 grammar schools were given grants if they gave 25% of their places to poor pupils. Working-class children could take an exam and if they passed could go to grammar school. However, some children won a place but did not go because their parents could not afford to buy the school uniform and equipment.

In 1909 the House of Lords rejected Lloyd George's budget. In response, the Liberals passed the Parliament Act, which stated the House of Lords, could not interfere with financial bills. The Lords could no longer veto any bills but only delay them for two years. In 1949 that was reduced to one year.

[The history of poverty](http://www.localhistories.org/povhist.html)

**Women get the vote**

By 1884 the majority of men in Britain were allowed to vote but women were not allowed to. So in 1897 local groups of women who demanded the vote joined to form the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS). The organization was moderate and its members were called suffragists.

However in 1903 a more radical organisation was formed called the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). Emmeline Pankhurst led it and its members were called suffragettes. Some suffragettes committed crimes like arson and vandalism. They also planted bombs. However, the suffragettes halted their campaign when the war began in 1914.

By no means all women were suffragettes. Many women were anti-suffragettes. They opposed women being allowed to vote. In Britain, the Women's National Anti-Suffrage League was formed in 1908. Its president was Mary Humphry Ward, a famous novelist. On the other hand, many men supported the suffragettes and wanted women to be allowed to vote.

In 1918 in Britain women over 30 were allowed to vote if they met a property qualification. In 1928 they were allowed to vote at the age of 21 (the same as men). In 1919 Nancy Astor was elected an MP. She was the first woman MP to take her seat in the House of Commons. In 1929 Margaret Bondfield became the first female cabinet minister. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher became the first female Prime Minister of Britain.

[The history of women](http://www.localhistories.org/womenhistory.html)

**The First World War**

Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914. A British expeditionary force was sent to France, led by Sir John French. It fought the Germans at Mons on 23 August. The Germans continued to advance but the French and British halted them at the Battle of the Marne in September. The Germans tried to outflank the allies but were blocked. Both sides dug trenches to protect themselves and soon the trenches ran in a continuous line. The war became a stalemate.

In 1916 the British launched an attack on the Somme. Both sides suffered horrific losses. However during this battle, the British unleashed a secret weapon - the tank. The first tanks were too unreliable and too few in number to affect the outcome of the battle but they were a sign of things to come.

In 1917 Germany began unrestricted submarine warfare. They sank any ships from any country attempting to reach Britain. As a result food in Britain ran very short but the crisis ended when the convoy system was introduced. Merchant ships traveled in groups protected by warships. Nevertheless, in 1918 rationing of meat, butter and cheese began. Furthermore, as a result of the German policy, the USA entered the war.

In the Spring of 1918 Germany launched a series of offensives in northern France. The allies fought on with their 'backs against the wall' and in August the British launched a counter-attack using tanks. The Germans were gradually pushed back and on 11 November they signed an armistice (ceasefire).

**Trade Unions and the General Strike**

By the early 20th century the trade unions had become powerful and they were increasingly militant. However, they met with opposition. In 1901 came the Taff Vale case when a court decided that trade unions could be sued for damages if they held a strike. It was repealed by the Trade Disputes Act 1906. In 1909 came the Osborne Judgement, which said that trade unions could not use members' subscriptions to fund political parties (i.e. the Labour Party). The case was brought by a man named W. V. Osborne, who was secretary of the Walthamstow branch on the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants. It was repealed by the Trade Union Act 1913, which allowed individual trade union members to opt-out of paying political fees.

From 1923 to 1929 Britain had a conservative government with Stanley Baldwin (1867-1947) as prime minister. During his time the general strike was held. During the 1920s old industries like coal mining were declining. So in 1921 employers cut wages. In 1926 they proposed to cut wages *and* increase working hours. The miner's leader A.J. Cooke said 'Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day'. the miners went on strike and appealed to the other unions to help them. The result was a general strike from midnight on 3 May 1926.

However the government was prepared. Realizing trade unions might unite and call a general strike they formed the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies in 1925. Middle-class volunteers helped to run services like buses and kept supplies moving. Troops and special constables also helped. The general strike ended on 12 May although the miners remained on strike for another 6 months. In the end, the miners went back to work defeated. In 1927 the Trade Disputes Act made general strikes illegal.

**Entertainment**

In 1922 the BBC began broadcasting radio programs. Radio first became common in the 1930s. By 1933 about half the households in Britain had a 'wireless' and by 1939 most of them did. Television began in 1936. It was suspended during World War II but it began again in 1946. In the 1920s some people went to see silent films but from about 1930 all films were 'talkies'. During the 1930s cinema-going became much more popular and many people went once or even twice a week.

**The Depression of the 1930s**

In 1929 the world was plunged into a severe economic recession. By 1932 22.8% of insured workers were unemployed. However, unemployment began to fall in 1933. By January 1936 it stood at 13.9%. By 1938 it stood at around 10%.

However in the late 1930s the North of England remained depressed and unemployment in the region remained very high. Traditional industries such as textiles and coal mining were severely affected by the Depression. Yet in the Midlands and the South of England new industries brought some prosperity and unemployment was lower. New industries included making cars and aircraft and electronics.

During the 1920s and 1930s a series of 'hunger marches' were held from depression areas to London. The first was from Glasgow in 1922 but the most famous was the Jarrow march of 1936 when 200 shipyard workers marched from Jarrow to London. The hunger marches gained a great deal of publicity for the plight of the unemployed but they did not succeed in their aim of actually reducing unemployment.

However because living standards had risen so much an unemployed man in 1936 was about as well off as an unskilled worker 30 years before. Nevertheless, life for the unemployed was grim. They lived in *relative* poverty.

Nevertheless despite the mass unemployment of the 1930s for most people with a job living standards rose substantially. That was partly due to a fall in prices. The price of essentials like food and rent fell 15% during the decade. So for most people life became steadily more comfortable during the 1930s. Furthermore from 1939 all workers were entitled to a minimum of 1 weeks annual paid holiday. Before then the only paid holidays many people had were bank holidays.

**The Second World War**

When war began on 3 September 1939 it was feared that the Germans would bomb British cities causing great loss of life. So children from the cities were evacuated to the countryside. Altogether 827,000 schoolchildren with 103,000 teachers and helpers left the big cities. Furthermore, 524,000 children below school age and their mothers left. However, most of the 'evacuees' soon returned home. The bombing raid on British cities failed to materialize - at first. It was severe in 1940-41.

On 10 May 1940 [Winston Churchill](http://www.localhistories.org/churchill.html) became prime minister of Britain.

Rationing in Britain began in September 1939 when petrol was rationed. As the war continued rationing became stricter and stricter. In January 1940 butter, sugar, bacon, and ham were rationed. Tea was rationed from July 1940. Then in May 1941 cheese was rationed and from June 1941 eggs were rationed. From July 1941 clothes were rationed and you had to save up coupons to buy them. From July 1942 sweets were rationed.

From 1942 dried (powdered) egg arrived from the USA. Meanwhile, the people were encouraged to 'dig for victory' and the amount of land under cultivation increased from 12 million acres in 1939 to 18 million acres in 1945.

On 7 September 1940 the Germans began bombing London and by 1 January 1941 over 13,000 Londoners were killed. Other cities heavily bombed during the 'blitz' included Birmingham, Coventry, Bristol, Portsmouth, and Plymouth.

German bombing lessened after mid-1941 when Hitler invaded Russia. From then on most German armed forces were concentrated in the east. However, in June 1944, the Germans unleashed a 'secret weapon'. It was a kind of rocket called a VI flying bomb. (The British public called them 'doodlebugs'). From September 1944 V2 rockets were launched. altogether 1,115 V2s hit England and about half of them hit London. The last V2 was fired on 27 March 1945. At first, the government claimed the explosions were caused by exploding gas mains (which didn't fool anybody!). They did not admit the truth until November 1944. Hitler called his new weapons vengeance weapons yet German bombing failed. It failed to dent British morale and it failed to seriously affect industrial output.

[Life in Britain during World War II](http://www.localhistories.org/secondlife.html)

About 1 million houses were destroyed or severely damaged during World War II. About 40,000 civilians were killed. After the war, Britain was left with a severe shortage of housing. The Housing Act of 1946 gave grants and subsidies for building houses. By 1951 900,000 new houses had been built.

**National Austerity**

Germany surrendered on 8 May 1945. Immediately afterward a general election was held (the first since November 1935). The Labour Party won by a landslide and Clement Attlee (1883-1967) became prime minister until 1951. Labour set about introducing a welfare state. By the National Insurance Act of 1946 everyone was entitled to unemployment benefits, sickness benefits, old-age pensions, and widows pensions. The National Health Service was introduced in 1948. (Many of the ideas for the welfare state were laid out by a Liberal named William Beveridge 1879-1963).

During World War II Britain was run by a coalition government. In 1944 it passed the Butler Education Act. (It was named after a Conservative, Richard Butler). In the future, all 11-year-old children would sit an exam (it became known as the 11+). Afterward, some went to grammar school to study academic subjects while others went to secondary modern schools to study technical subjects. Both types of schools were supposed to be equal. (In the official phrase they had 'parity of esteem'). However in the eyes of the public if you 'passed' the 11+ you went to a grammar school. If you 'failed' you went to a secondary modern. In 1947 the school leaving age was raised to 15.

However the period 1945-1951 was one of 'national austerity' when many goods were in short supply and long queues were common. Rationing continued and it actually grew stricter than during the war. Conditions were hardest in 1947 when there was a severe winter. Bread was rationed in July 1946 and in November 1947 potatoes were rationed.

The Labour party also nationalized certain industries (made them state-owned). Coal was nationalized in 1947. So were the railways. In 1948 gas and electricity were nationalized. Meanwhile, shortages gradually lessened. Clothes rationing ended in 1949 and petrol rationing ended in 1950. However, the rationing of butter and meat lasted until 1954.

**The Affluent Society**

However in the mid-1950s Britain became an affluent society. For the first time, ordinary people had substantial amounts of money to spend on luxuries. Consumer goods became common. By 1960 44% of homes owned a washing machine. In 1959 about 2/3 of homes owned a vacuum cleaner.

In the 1960s Britain became a truly affluent society. Washing machines and vacuum cleaners became near-universal. Cars and fridges became common. Foreign holidays became common for the first time. Central heating, electric blankets, electric kettles and toasters, and a host of other goods became common in the 1960s. By 1975 90% of homes had a vacuum cleaner, 85% had a fridge and 70% owned a washing machine. Furthermore, 52% had a telephone and 47% had central heating.

Meanwhile until the mid-1970s there was full employment in most areas of Britain. For most of the period 1945-1973 unemployment was less than 5%. By 1973 it was creeping upwards but it was still only 3%.

From 1951 to 1964 Britain was ruled by the Conservatives. From 1951 to 1955 [Winston Churchill](http://www.localhistories.org/churchill.html) was Prime Minister. Anthony Eden who was Prime Minister till 1957 replaced him. He was followed by Harold Macmillan who was prime minister till 1963. Sir Alec-Douglas Home was prime minister for a short period in 1963-64. However in 1964 Labour won a general election and Harold Wilson became prime minister. Labour won another election in 1966. Wilson remained prime minister until 1970.

Meanwhile in the 1960s and 1970s most secondary schools became comprehensives. Also in the 1960s there was a big expansion of further and higher education. In 1945 there were only 17 universities. By the 1970s there were 46. There were also 30 polytechnics. (In 1992 they were upgraded to universities). In 1973 the school leaving age was raised to 16. In 1988 a national curriculum was introduced.

[The history of education](http://www.localhistories.org/education.html)

**The 1970s**

Meanwhile in the years after 1945 the trade unions grew very powerful. By 1970 their membership had almost doubled. Nearly half the workforce belonged to a union. In the winter of 1972 the coal miners went on strike and the government was forced to give in to their demands. They went on strike again in the winter of 1974. This time Heath was determined not to back down and he called an election in February 1974 on the issue 'who governs the country?'. However Heath lost the election and Wilson became prime minister again. Wilson won another election in October 1974.

Meanwhile in 1973 Britain joined the EEC (forerunner of the EU). The first elections for the European parliament were held in 1979.

By 1973 the long period of economic prosperity was coming to an end. By the spring of 1975 unemployment had climbed to 1 million. It was over 5% of the workforce. By 1977 it had risen to 5.5% and in 1979 it stood at 5.3%. Meanwhile there was also high inflation.

In 1978 in an effort to tackle inflation the government tried to persuade trade unions to limit pay rises to no more than 5%. The trade unions refused to accept the limit and Britain was hit by a wave of strikes. As a result the government's popularity diminished and in may 1979 the Conservatives won a general election. Margaret Thatcher became Britain's first woman prime minister.

**The 1980s**

In 1980-82 Britain suffered a severe recession. Unemployment rose sharply. By January 1982 it was 11.5%, double the May 1979 figure. Not surprisingly the government was deeply unpopular. However in April 1982 the Argentinians invaded the Falkland Islands. The British sent a task force and on 14 June 1982 the Falklands were recaptured. The war greatly boosted the government's popularity and it contributed to the government's victory in the general election of 1983. (The Conservatives won a third election in 1987).

Meanwhile recession ended in the autumn of 1982 and recovery began. Furthermore unemployment leveled off. (However unemployment remained very high until 1986. In the summer of that year the official figure was 14.1%. However unemployment then fell steadily. The government also succeeded in greatly reducing inflation. Despite the mass unemployment of the 1980s most people with a job experienced a substantial rise in their living standards during the decade.

On the other hand the percentage of people living in poverty increased. That was partly due to mass unemployment. Another cause was the rapidly rising number of single parent families many of whom lived on state benefits.

The Conservatives also sold council houses cheaply and the number of council houses fell significantly. The government also privatized industries. British Aerospace and Cable and Wireless were sold in 1981. Then in 1982-83 the National Freight Corporation and Associated Business Ports were sold. British gas was sold in 1986. British telecom was sold in 1984. British gas was sold in 1986.

A showdown between the government and the trade unions took place with the 1984-85 coal strike. The National Coal Board announced the closure of certain collieries. Some Yorkshire coal miners went on strike in March 1984. However the miner's trade union leader, Arthur Scargill, refused to call a national ballot to decide if all miners should go on strike. Instead it was left to each region to decide. That was a fatal mistake because miners in Nottinghamshire (who were much less likely to lose their jobs) stayed at work. As long as *some* miners kept working the strike could not succeed.

Furthermore the government was in a strong position. For one thing they had stockpiled coal. For another generating stations that usually burned coal could burn a mixture of coal and oil. Also striking miners could not claim welfare benefits. So all the government had to do was wait until poverty forced the strikers back to work. The miners strike began to crumble in November 1984 as miners drifted back to work. By January more than half of all strikers had returned to work and the strike ended in March 1985. It was a severe defeat for militant trade unionism. Furthermore during the 1980s the government passed a series of laws restricting the powers of the trade unions.

**The 1990s**

In 1990 the government introduced a new tax in England called the community charge (popularly known as the poll tax). It was very unpopular and in 1993 it was replaced by the council tax. Meanwhile Margaret Thatcher resigned in 1990. She was replaced by John Major.

In the middle of 1990 a long recession started and unemployment rose sharply. Economic recovery began in 1993. From 1993 onward unemployment fell steadily and by 2000 it was at a level not seen since 1979. Meanwhile in April 1992 the Conservatives won another general election, even though the country was in recession. However in 1997 Labour finally won an election and Tony Blair became prime minister.