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The Coming of the Depression

What were the main causes of the Depression?

Before the Great War, Britain's prosperity had depended on the sale of heavy industrial goods such as coal and steel. However, at the end of the war, these older traditional industries entered a period of decline. Rising costs in production, obsolete methods and a failure to invest in new technology and machinery contributed to the decline in these traditional industries. There was a fall in demand for British goods and increased competition from abroad particularly from the USA and Germany. The more expensive British goods could not compete with cheaper imports. To make matters worse, Britain's traditional prewar export markets (countries that represented the core of the economic strength of the Empire such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand) were no longer prepared to buy British. They bought US steel, German coal and Indian cotton instead. This brought to an end the so-called 'golden age' of Welsh and British heavy industry. When the worldwide economic Depression arrived in the early 1930s, Britain's old industries could not cope.

The Wall Street Crash

The principal cause of the Depression was the Wall Street Crash of 1929. The collapse of the US stock market caused a financial crisis in which some major banks in the USA ceased trading and many businesses were plunged into bankruptcy. This led to rising unemployment which added to the economic problems as it led to a reduction in spending. As unemployment rose, sales declined further. The way to end a depression is to get people to buy things, but the US government did not know how to do this.
The US president, Herbert Hoover, became alarmed. Unsure of what to do, he called in America's huge loans to other countries. He also put up customs barriers by imposing high tariffs to stop imports of foreign goods. However, instead of protecting America, Hoover's policy simply spread the Depression across the rest of the world which also fell into an economic slump. It has been said, 'When America sneezes, the rest of the world catches cold.'

Impact of the Wall Street Crash

(i) The British economy, industry and employment

The massive financial crisis in America, the Wall Street Crash, led to the collapse of the largest, richest and most powerful economy in the world. Britain, Europe and many of the world's industrial powers had come to depend on US loans and trade. When America's economy crashed, so did theirs. This was the beginning of a world slump; its effects on Wales and England were devastating. The world slump in production and trade lasted longer and was deeper than many governments had

imagined. The slump turned into a depression because it affected both employers and employees. Some businesses crashed while others struggled to survive. Production slumped because orders declined. This in turn led to many companies laying off workers. Unfortunately, these redundancies and dismissals contributed to the Depression because as unemployment rose, the decline in orders fell even more sharply.
Clearly, the crisis of 1929 had a significant impact on the British economy, but it may be argued that Britain was already suffering from the effects of economic decline before the crisis of 1929. The collapse of the post-war economic boom in 1921, increased competition from abroad, the disaster of the General Strike of 1926 and the decline in the mining and steel industries crippled the British economy. Therefore, it is probably fair to say that the crisis of 1929 simply made an already bad situation worse.

(ii) Impact on British politics

Perhaps the most significant impact of the 1929 crisis was on British politics. When the crisis hit Britain in 1929, many politicians were convinced that the economy would right itself. They felt that economic recovery was better left to businessmen rather than politicians. In the long run all would be well was their response. The famous economist John Maynard Keynes disagreed. 'In the long run we are all dead,' was his cynical reply. A minority of politicians simply did not know how best to solve the crisis. More radical politicians, such as Labour's Sir Oswald Mosley, called for massive government spending to create jobs and for high tariffs on foreign imports to protect British industry. Keynes and the leader of the opposition Liberals, David Lloyd George, tried to persuade the government to accept Mosley's plan for action, but they rejected it. Nevertheless, the crisis got so bad that it was agreed that, as in wartime, party political differences should be set aside. In 1931 a National Government was set up. Led by Labour's Ramsay Macdonald, this coalition government, of mainly Conservatives with some Labour and Liberal MPs, tried to cope with the worsening economic and social crisis.

(iii) Impact on British people

Many people lost their jobs as a result of the Depression. The unemployed had no wages and could not buy things. This resulted in more businesses going bankrupt which in turn created more unemployment. This was a vicious circle made worse by the fact that the dole or unemployment benefits were barely enough to pay the rent, let alone feed and clothe a family.
The government responded to the crisis by trying to cut costs. The first target of these cuts was the benefits paid to the unemployed. A man without work was entitled to benefit under the unemployment insurance scheme.

This was known as the dole and it was paid for the first six months. However, in order to qualify for dole, a worker had to pass a means test which was introduced in 1931. Public Assistance Committees were set up to investigate a family's finances thoroughly before benefits could be given. The intrusiveness of the means test, and the insensitive manner adopted by some officials who carried it out, frustrated and offended many people. The usual rate for the dole was 15s. (75p) per week for man and wife and about 5s. (25p) for each child. The British Medical Association estimated that a family of two adults and three children needed at least 22s. 7d. (£1.12) for food for a week. To make matters worse, in 1931 the dole was cut by 10 per cent. Life was very hard for those people whose lives were blighted by unemployment.

How were people able to cope with the challenges of the Depression Years?

One of the major effects of the world slump in trade and industrial production was the massive rise in unemployment. By 1933 world unemployment topped 30 million people of whom some 3 million were British, around 13 million were American and 6 million were German. The worst hit areas in Britain were those still dependent on the old heavy industries. Thus, the two worst affected areas of Britain were in south Wales and in the north-east of England. By 1938 the unemployment rate in each of the four basic heavy industries of coal, cotton, shipbuilding and steel was twice what it was in other forms of employment. In these areas, and in these industries, unemployment became a way of life.

Source B: A miner and his family, Rhondda valley, 1931, before mass unemployment hit the valley.
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Impact of mass unemployment on people in the industrial areas

Mass unemployment was a human tragedy that led to a loss of dignity and a sense of hopelessness. Rising unemployment affected women as well as men. In many cases, the man was the sole breadwinner so that when he lost his job the whole family suffered. Women were forced to 'make ends meet' either by maintaining the home on a limited budget or, if they were fortunate, by seeking (often poorly paid) employment in domestic service or in retail as shop assistants. Unemployment led to poverty which affected the health, both physical and mental, of those who suffered from its effects. Evidence of the effects of unemployment and poverty is provided in a report written in 1933 by Dr Rankin, Chief Medical Officer for Gelligaer District Council:

The district has again had a continued epidemic of scarlet fever during the year, the majority of cases being of severe type. The general want of resistance to attack and the severity of the symptoms were, in my opinion, due to general malnutrition among the children, the result of the unfortunate economic conditions in South Wales.[1]

Whole communities became depressed and were depressing places to live. According to one eyewitness, Dora Cox, the situation had become desperate. Interviewed in 1985, she said:

Living in Wales one could see much more clearly the absolutely humiliating and devastating effect of unemployment on people, particularly in the valleys, where all hope seemed to be gone. Men were standing on the street corners not knowing what to do with themselves – people were really hungry. Well you couldn't not take part in any activity, which would make people themselves feel that, at least, they were fighting back and, also, you felt it was absolutely essential to get other people to understand the enormity of the situation .[2]

This caused many individuals and families to relocate in search of work. Migration from the north-east of England and from south Wales to the wealthier and least affected areas of the Midlands and the south-east of England increased during the 1930s.

Reaction to the Depression: protest

Unlike Dylan Thomas, the vast majority of people in traditional industrial areas could not so easily escape the Depression. The government's apparent inability to deal with the Depression convinced many people that there was no alternative but to protest. A mass demonstration with popular support and maximum publicity might force the government into positive action. Thousands of people became involved in resisting the Depression and protesting against its effects and the continuing unemployment and hardship. In a letter in 1935 to Sir John Gilmour, the Home Secretary, the MP for the Rhondda, W. H. Mainwaring, stated:

[1] *Medical officer of health reports*, 1920-39 (The Welsh Board of Health Collection, National Library of Wales, Gallery 2).

[2] G. E. Jones and T. Herbert (eds.), *Wales between the Wars* (Cardiff, 1988).

The Minister, perhaps, can make some attempt to imagine the depth of feeling in the Rhondda when I tell him that there is a total population of less than 140,000 and a week ago yesterday, 100,000 people demonstrated there. There was nobody in that district who was not demonstrating except those who were in hospital. I only wish to God that the same thing would happen in London.[3]

Mainwaring's concern to highlight the plight of the unemployed in his constituency is echoed in an article published in the local newspaper, the Rhondda Leader:

People who have lived in the valley all their lives were sure that they had never witnessed such a scene of protest. It was not a movement begun by any particular party, but a united front of Union Officials, Communists, Ministers of Religion and business and professional men, with members of Parliament, Magistrates and Councillors, rubbing shoulders with all sections of the populace.[4]

However, not everyone was sympathetic to the problems suffered by the unemployed in Wales. A pamphlet entitled 'What's Wrong with Wales' (issued by the New Statesman and Nation magazine in 1935) believed that the poverty and hardship reported in Wales had been exaggerated:

So many remedies have been tried in vain. South Wales has become a bore. It is like a crying babe in the hands of an ignorant mother. It is smacked by one Government department and kissed by another. Why won't it go to sleep like Dorsetshire?[5]

In 1936 King Edward VIII toured Wales to see for himself the hardship and poverty caused by the Depression. He was visibly upset by what he saw and shocked by the stories which he heard from the unemployed people he met. He was reported to have said, 'Something must be done.' Unfortunately, nothing was done. The following extract from a letter addressed to King Edward from some residents in Pontypool and published in the Western Mail in November 1936, might suggest why nothing was done:

Today you will be visiting the towns and villages of our valleys, and a valley blighted by the dead hand of poverty. We regret that your tour has been planned in such a way that the terrible effects of this poverty will not be seen.[6]

Source C: Unemployment protest; Welshmen march from Cardiff to London
© Richards / Stringer / getty images

[3] G. E. Jones and T. Herbert (eds.), *Wales between the Wars* (Cardiff, 1988).
[4] *Rhondda Leader*, 1935.
[5] *New Statesman and Nation*, 1935.
[6] *Western Mail*, 1936.

Hunger marches and their impact

During the 1930s, as well as local protests, there were also many protest marches from the north-east of England and south Wales. The people living in these areas were becoming more militant because they had been experiencing high levels of unemployment, poverty, malnutrition and disease for some time. The government seemed incapable of dealing with the problems or, at worst, appeared to be indifferent to the plight of the poor. Protesting in the areas in which they lived appeared to have little impact on the government, so it was decided to widen the protest. Marches to London were organised to confront the government and, in so doing, gain much needed publicity. It was hoped that the media would be encouraged to report their story and highlight their plight.

In October 1932 there was a large-scale march on London by 2,500 workers from all over the country. Trade unionists played a major role in organising the march and in arranging food and shelter for the marchers. They presented a petition to Parliament demanding the abolition of the means test and protesting about the 10 per cent cut in benefits.

Perhaps the most famous protest march was the Jarrow Crusade of 1936, but there were also marches from south Wales. Most demanded similar things – government action to create jobs and better benefits for the unemployed.

Source D: Jarrow marchers en route to London. © Pictorial Press / Alamy

Historians are divided about the impact that these protest marches had. Even contemporaries were mixed in their opinions about the effectiveness of these marches. For example, the Aberdare Leader, a Welsh newspaper reported the following:

Keen as the resentment is throughout the valleys against the new Means Test, the procession had the atmosphere of a Sunday School rally. There were smiles, jokes and laughter on every side. Men wore good-looking overcoats and suits, young fellows, many of them unemployed, wore smartly cut clothes, shining shoes and even yellow gloves, looking the mirror of fashion; young women walked in attractive hats, smart coats and dainty high heeled shoes. There was little outward indication of poverty and want such as the majority of the families of the unemployed are experiencing now. A true blue Tory supporter of the National Government would undoubtedly have pointed an accusing finger and said, 'Bah! Where is your poverty and hardship?'[7]
As the newspaper feared, some ministers in the government were less than impressed with the marches. In 1936 The Times, a London-based newspaper, reported on a speech given in Parliament by Sir Thomas Inskip, Minister of Defence:
We hear a little too much about depressed areas, and not quite enough of what the spirit of these areas has achieved in bringing about her own recovery.[8]

A clearly frustrated editor of the Daily Worker newspaper reported:
Not the slightest mention on any of the film newsreels of the Hunger Marches or of the tremendous London demonstrations. I have been looking out for them in the London cinemas but cannot find a trace; I suppose the same is true of all the local cinemas. So the distortion and suppression of the newsreels goes on . . . The Hunger Marches and the demonstrations are not news; but the visit of Princess Ingrid is very important news, as also is the visit of the Arsenal football team to France, and a woman swinging by her teeth over New York and so on.[9]
When the Jarrow marchers arrived in London, having walked almost 300 miles, they were met by a delegation consisting of the following:
The Bishop of Jarrow Sir John Jarvis, Bt., MP The Lord Mayor of London Lord Snell, Chairman of London County Council Ellen Wilkinson, MP Councillor R. I. Dodds, ex-Mayor of Jarrow
Arrangements had been made to hold a special meeting at the Farringdon Memorial Hall, London, after which a petition would be presented to the government. The government did not react. The only glimmer of sympathy for the marchers came from the North-east Public Assistance Committee which recommended to the Durham County Public Assistance Committee that allowances should be paid to the dependants of men participating in the march. However, it is almost impossible not to conclude that in spite of gaining publicity, the Jarrow marchers had had little impact on the government.
Historian A. J. P. Taylor offered a more balanced evaluation of the effectiveness of the hunger marches and the march for jobs:
Select bands of unemployed from the depressed areas marched on London, where

[7] *Aberdare Leader*, 1936.
[8] *The Times*, 1935.
[9] *Daily Worker*, 1935.

they demonstrated to little purpose. Their progress through the country, however, was a propaganda stroke of great effect. The hunger marchers displayed the failure of capitalism. Middle-class people felt the call of conscience. They set up soup-kitchens for the marchers and accommodated them in local schools.[10]

'Making ends meet', self-help and the contribution of women

A revived 'cult of domesticity', associated with mass circulation magazines such as Woman, emerged during the 1930s. Since the dominant ideology of the times dictated that the housewife's place was in the home, few women managed to break out from the limitations of the home into the public world of politics, commerce and the professions. The only opportunity available to the majority of women was in domestic service or in the retail trade as shop assistants. During this period the home remained the only place where many women had any influence or authority, which may explain why marriage rates rose rapidly. Maintaining the home on a tight budget, effectively 'making ends meet', was a constant source of stress and anxiety for women who worked very long hours in the struggle against poverty and grime. According to a report compiled by the Pilgrim's Trust, Men Without Work, published in 1938, the effect of this never-ending daily routine of hard work on women's pride, appearance and health, was devastating:

The outstanding fact about many of these homes was that the men in them appeared to have higher standards of personal cleanliness than those reflected by their living conditions. It seemed, very largely, their womenfolk who had lost all pride in personal appearance and the appearance of the home. We must face the fact that to live constantly on a depressed standard of living, where life is a hand-to-mouth existence, is, except for the bravest souls, to experience the bitterness of defeat.[11]

As historian Deirdre Beddoe concluded, 'Women's employment prospects were bleak and home life and health left much to be desired.' That said, there is evidence to suggest that an increasing number of women participated in the campaigns to persuade the government to change its economic policy and to prevent cuts to benefits. It became clear to many that they could not rely on help from the authorities, from 'outsiders', and that 'self-help' was the only way for the community to make progress. Thus, in south Wales a female-led campaign to persuade mine owners to provide pit-head baths was successful. Many women took part in the hunger marches whilst others organised demonstrations of their own. For example, in 1935 women from the south Wales valleys attacked the Unemployment Assistance Board's offices in Merthyr. The experience of some women demonstrators is captured by Lewis Jones in his novel We Live.

[10] A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914–1945. Oxford History of England* vol. 15 (Oxford, 1965).
[11] *Men Without Work* (Cambridge, 1938).

Half an hour before the demonstration was timed to start the women and children and the unemployed men in the streets were lined up with a red banner at their head with 'Sunny Bank Women want Bread not Batons'.[12] Clearly, the Depression had a significant impact on the lives of women during the 1930s.

Escapism: entertainment and sport

Despite the Depression and unemployment, the years between the wars were rich in opportunities for people to enjoy themselves. For the thousands with time on their hands, affordable leisure became an important feature of everyday life. They might go to the races to bet on the dogs or horses, to a football or rugby match, to clubs or even to the free libraries to read books and newspapers. On the other hand, they might take advantage of modern technology to be entertained by sound – through radio in the home, or by sound and vision in the local cinema.

The first radio, popularly known as the 'wireless', appeared in Britain in 1922. The first wireless or radio sets were expensive to buy and costly to licence, but within a few years mass production brought the price down to a level most people could afford. In 1926 the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was set up to run the new national radio service. Its task was to inform and entertain the listening public. This it did with a combination of live theatre, classical music and news programmes. Soon the BBC was broadcasting schools programmes, plays, popular music and comedy. Between 1929 and 1933 the sale of radio licences registered by the Post Office had doubled. In one year alone (1937) 56,970 wireless licences were issued in Cardiff, approximately one per household. The average cost of a radio licence was 15s. (75p). In 1937, after many years of campaigning, the BBC was persuaded to set up a Welsh service based in Cardiff to cater for the needs of Wales and its people. By 1939 nearly 75 per cent of British families owned a wireless set.
The biggest rival to radio was the cinema. For the price of a sixpenny (2p) ticket, the cinema offered an escape for many people from the harsh realities of life. A majority of the films shown in British cinemas were American, made in Hollywood. Film stars such as Clark Gable, Greta Garbo and Errol Flynn became famous across the world. It was the dream of every cinemagoer to meet their screen heroes or to become film stars themselves. During the 1930s one Welshman's dream became a reality. Raymond Truscott-Jones from Cadoxton in Neath left Wales to became famous as the Hollywood actor Ray Milland.

As the popularity of the cinema soared, so did the level of investment in films and buildings. By 1939 there were 4,776 cinemas in Britain which sold on average nearly 23 million tickets per week. The BBC feared that cinema would replace radio as the most popular form of entertainment. In 1936 the BBC began live television

[12] Lewis Jones, *We Live* (London, 1937).

broadcasts but this new form of entertainment 'cinema in the home' was far too expensive for the majority of people. By 1939 there were only 50,000 viewers.
The famous novelist George Orwell commented on the powerful influence of cinema in his book, The Road to Wigan Pier, published in 1937:
In nearly a decade of depression the two things that have probably made the greatest difference of all are the movies and the mass production of cheap smart clothes. A youth of 20 for £2 10s. [£2.50] on hire-purchase can buy himself a suit whilst the girl can look like a fashion plate at even lower prices. You may have three half pence in your pocket and not a prospect in the world, and only a corner of a leaky bedroom at home but, in your new clothes, you can stand on a street corner indulging in a private day-dream of yourself as Clark Gable or Greta Garbo which compensates you a great deal.[13]
The three most popular sports in the industrialised areas of south Wales and the north of England were rugby (union and league), football and boxing. Boxing was the sport of the working classes and during the Depression of the 1930s it became very popular. For many, boxing provided the means to escape their poverty and unemployment. Local clubs arranged bouts for which the boxers would be paid. The aim was to become a champion boxer but very few made it. Tommy Farr, an unemployed fairground fighter from Tonypandy, was perhaps the most successful Welsh boxer. He was remembered as 'the man who nearly beat Joe Louis' (the world champion from America)

Tackling the problems caused by the Depression

(i) Dealing with unemployment

As unemployment continued to rise, the government was faced with a new problem, namely what to do about the long-term unemployed. These were the people who had been unemployed for more than six months and had used up their dole. As the cost of benefits rose, there were calls to reduce them further. In an effort to avoid bad publicity, the government passed the Unemployment Act of 1934 which set up the Unemployment Assistance Boards.
The UABs were responsible for managing the means test and ensuring that benefits were paid only to those who were 'desperately in need' and then only if they were 'actively seeking work'. The means by which those 'desperately in need' were defined varied from area to area as some UABs applied the means test more rigorously than others. To solve this apparent inequality, the government decided that from 1934 unemployment benefit rates would be set nationally rather than locally. In addition, the 1934 Unemployment Act separated dole and insurance benefits, and the 10 per cent cut in dole was reversed.
From 1936 the UABs were made responsible for dealing with workers who had used

[13] George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London, 1937).

up their insurance benefits. The UABs took over some of the work of the Labour Exchanges and continued to administer the dole and means test. UAB officials were less severe than officials who ran the Public Assistance Committees. The UABs set up training schemes and provided help to workers who wanted to move to another area to find work. Society went some way towards accepting that unemployment was not a failing of the people, dispelling the notion that the poor could work if they really wanted to.

(ii) Creating new light industries

As the traditional heavy industries declined, the new light industries emerged to take their place. These industries tended to concentrate on consumer goods such as cars, cookers, fridges and radios. For an ever-expanding market, the goods were mass-produced in modern factories equipped with the latest technology. Consumers were encouraged by mass advertising to buy the new cars, radios and household gadgets on the new hire purchase system. This new system of credit meant that even the most expensive items could be bought by the ordinary consumer.
When mass production methods were applied to the motor car industry, the number of cars sold in Britain rose from 132,000 in 1913 to about 2 million in 1938. In 1923 the most popular car on the market was the Austin 7 which sold for £225, but by 1936 the price had fallen to £125. The new technology and machinery used in the growing light industries needed a new and efficient source of power: electricity. Electricity was clean, cheap and efficient and it began to replace coal as the nation's main fuel supply. In 1926 the Central Electricity Board was set up to supply the needs of industry, but British homes were also given the opportunity to go 'on the mains'. Between 1920 and 1938 the number of consumers supplied with electricity increased from 730,000 to 9 million.

The government encouraged these new industries by offering grants and by setting up industrial estates. It was thought that those made unemployed by the old industries would find jobs in the new industries. This did not happen. Far too many people were being made redundant for the new consumer industries to take them. Also the new skills needed to work in the consumer industries required retraining, a costly exercise for which the government was unwilling to pay. With the exception of the new aircraft and chemical industries, the factories of these newer light industries were much smaller and they employed a million fewer people. By the late 1930s the sale of British consumer goods only accounted for 15 per cent of the nation's total exports.

(iii) The Special Areas Act

In a further measure to attract industry to relocate to the most depressed areas, the government passed the Special Areas Act in 1934. The act identified South Wales, Tyneside, West Cumberland and Scotland as areas with special employment requirements, and invested in projects such as the new steelworks in Ebbw Vale. The success of the act was limited because the level of investment – capped at £2 million – was not high enough; after two years of operation only 12,000 additional jobs had been created. The commissioner appointed by the government to administer the act, Sir Malcolm Stewart, admitted, 'generally speaking, we have failed.'

Opponents of the government in Parliament claimed that the special areas were simply a gesture – that it was important for the government to be seen to be doing something. Ironically, the unemployment figures in these special areas had witnessed a significant decrease by 1938, a fact which the government used to support the notion that its policies had been responsible for the improvement. However, the real cause of the drop in unemployment was due largely to the migration of workers to the more prosperous districts of the Midlands and the south-east of England.

Migration and emigration

For much of the nineteenth century, and up until the beginning of the Great War in 1914, Wales had attracted thousands of immigrants. However, the post-war depression of the 1920s and the Great Depression of the 1930s reduced the flow of immigrants to a trickle. Within a few short years pre-war immigration had turned into post-war migration on a massive scale. The reasons for this are not hard to understand. Unemployment in Wales and the north-east of England was widespread, long-lasting and severe. Unlike the north-east of England, Wales experienced massive levels of outmigration during the 1920s and 1930s. It has been estimated that 440,000 people left Wales between 1921 and 1938. The majority, some 85 per cent, left the south Wales valleys of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire. To take one example, by 1933 a quarter of the population of Pembroke Dock, some 3,500 people, had migrated, leaving a town in which (by 1937) 55 per cent were listed as unemployed.

During the 1920s and 1930s a large number of Welsh and northern English people left Britain altogether. For many of them, the United States of America was seen as a land of opportunity.

It had glittering cities such as New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco; it had Hollywood and jazz, but more importantly it had work. In one American town, a

large number of ex-Tredegar folk successfully established its own Welsh community. Still more Welsh émigrés sought work in Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

For those who did not wish to leave Britain, the only alternative was to seek work in the prosperous regions of England. Thousands of Welsh workers and their families were encouraged to leave Wales by the government. The Ministry of Labour set up a scheme to help unemployed workers willing to move to popular destinations such as London, Coventry, Watford, Slough and Oxford. There, they were employed in light engineering and car manufacturing. One of the biggest employers of Welsh workers was the Morris motor car company at Cowley in Oxford.

The migration of so many people from Wales to England had serious consequences for some parts of the country. The population of the Rhondda fell 13 per cent in the 1920s and possibly by as much as 18 per cent in the 1930s, so that by 1951 there were around 111,000 compared to the 162,000 of twenty years earlier. Merthyr Tydfil too suffered a sharp decline in its population with around 26,600 people leaving the town between 1921 and 1939. Hartlepool and Gateshead in the north-east of England also suffered significant losses in population due to migration. Here over 20 per cent of the population moved south in search of work.

In Wales, the migration and emigration of such large numbers of people had an effect on the Welsh language and culture.

According to historian, Deian Hopkin, in his article, 'Social Reactions to Economic Change' (published in 1988):

An indication of demographic change is revealed by the statistics for the Welsh language. The number of monoglot Welsh speakers dropped dramatically from 155,000 in 1921 to 97,000 by 1931, and probably to no more than 60,000 by 1939. But it was the decline in Welsh speakers as a whole that was most serious; by 1931 the downward trend had begun and accelerated throughout the period. Much of the decline arose because a substantial sector of the population was fleeing.[14]

Old and new: were there two Britains?

According to the historian Bryn O'Callaghan:

There were really two Britains in the 1930s. There was the Britain which depended for its living on the old, staple industries such as coal and shipbuilding. The other Britain was built on new industries making new products – motor vehicles, electrical goods, man-made fibres.[15]

If it was not for the severity of the Depression in the north-east of England, this description might almost serve as a useful comparison between a depressed Wales and a prosperous England. Certainly, the prosperous south-east of England was a world away from depressed south-east Wales. New investment, new housing, better roads and efficient rail transport transformed London and the surrounding Home Counties. Businessmen and industrialists found it cheaper and easier to set up a

[14] Deian Hopkin, 'Social Reactions to Economic Change', in Jones and Herbert (eds.), *Wales between the Wars* (Cardiff, 1988).

[15] Bryn O'Callaghan, *A History of the Twentieth Century* (London, 1987).

factory in somewhere like Slough than in somewhere like Merthyr Tydfil. Slough had better road and rail links and it was nearer London, a city of nearly 6 million people. London and the densely populated south-east could provide a skilled workforce and a ready market for buying goods. 80 per cent of the new factories built and 65 per cent of the new jobs created between 1931 and 1937 were located in London and the south-east of England. There was little outward sign of poverty in these areas. In fact, it was in these areas that the building boom occurred which, according to historian A. J. P. Taylor, 'was the outstanding cause of the recovery of the thirties.' Indeed, Neville Chamberlain, a government minister, said in 1935, 'Broadly speaking, we may say that we have recovered in this country 80 per cent of our prosperity.' To speak of an economic recovery in the 1930s might appear premature

Source E: Slum housing in 1930s Britain. © Classic image / getty images

if not insensitive especially for the thousands of unemployed living in the so-called special areas, but the fact is that between 1932 and 1935 some three million houses had been built and nearly a quarter of a million slum houses had been demolished. This activity accounted for over 30 per cent of the increase in employment by 1939. However, it must be remembered that this economic boom and the jobs it created was mainly concentrated in the south-east of England and the Midlands.

Some historians of late have tended to paint a more cheerful picture of the thirties than once used to be prevalent. No doubt, amongst the owner-occupiers of London,

the home counties, and the east Midlands, with their cars, their housing estates, their thriving new light industries based on consumer durables, hire purchase and the newer technologies, the thirties were not such a bad time in which to live. But in south Wales, this verdict cannot possibly be accepted. The thirties there were a time when a whole society was crucified by mass unemployment and near-starvation.[16]
The north of England had more in common with south Wales than with southern England. Both regions were suffering high unemployment and economic decline. To reiterate, when the government did nothing to prevent the closure of the shipyards in the north-east of England, 75 per cent of Jarrow's workers became unemployed. In an effort to meet the Prime Minister, 200 of them marched the 300 miles to London. Newsreel cameramen and press photographers marched with them and recorded every day of the fourteen day trek south. Along the route the marchers were blessed in a service in Ripon Cathedral, they were joined by politicians such as Helen Wilkinson, the Labour MP for Jarrow, and they had their boots mended free of charge by the Leicester Co-op. They marched to the sound of mouth organs and they were fed and sheltered by sympathisers along the way.
This was perhaps the most famous protest march of the 1930s, but it achieved little or nothing. Unfortunately for the shipbuilders of Jarrow and the coalminers of the Rhondda, the power to cure unemployment lay with the politicians who sat in a Parliament situated in the prosperous London borough of Westminster. The contrast between poverty and prosperity was evident in Wales. There might have been a housing shortage in Pontypridd or slum housing in Merthyr during the thirties, but in the Uplands in Swansea, in Cyncoed and Roath in Cardiff and in the Garden Village in Wrexham, hundreds of private houses were built for a prosperous middle class. Unemployment in the Rhondda and Rhymney valleys was nearly four times that of Cardiff. Even new industries like the chemical industry opened new plants on Tyneside in the north-east of England and in north Wales. However, it was not until the late 1930s that the shadow of unemployment lifted from Britain, due largely to government investment in rearmament.

How effectively did Britain prepare for war?

The majority of historians agree that Germany's threat began by challenging the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. The treaty had limited the size of Germany's army to 100,000 men and forbidden that the country rearm or have a navy. The treaty had also forbidden Germany to send its troops into the Rhineland, a demilitarised zone, and to unite with German-speaking Austria.

1934-35: CONSCRIPTION AND REARMAMENT Hitler's introduction of conscription (calling up men to the army) and his adoption of the policy of rearmament are cited by many historians as the first step to war. This is because Hitler's build-up of

[16] Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980* (Cardiff, 1981).

Germany's armed forces broke the Treaty of Versailles. Britain and France did not respond.
1935: ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENT Britain signed an agreement allowing Germany to build a navy. This broke the Treaty of Versailles. The agreement set a limit to the size of Germany's navy to one third the size of Britain's. The French were angry because they had not been consulted.
1936: RHINELAND Hitler remilitarised the Rhineland when troops were ordered in to occupy this region of Germany. This broke the Treaty of Versailles. It was a bluff – the German army had orders to retreat if they met any resistance. Britain and France did nothing.
1938: AUSTRIA After stirring up trouble in Austria by encouraging the Austrian Nazis to demand union with Germany, Hitler invaded the country. This broke the Treaty of Versailles, but Britain and France did nothing.
1938: SUDETENLAND AND MUNICH Hitler next stirred up trouble in Czechoslovakia by encouraging the Sudeten Germans to demand union with Germany. This time Britain and France did something. Hitler made plans to invade Czechoslovakia but was persuaded to meet with the leaders of Britain and France to discuss the situation. At a conference at Munich in September, Britain and France appeased Hitler by giving him the Sudetenland. The Czechs were ignored.
1939: CZECHOSLOVAKIA In March Hitler's troops marched into the rest of Czechoslovakia. This broke the agreement signed at Munich six months earlier. The British and French realised that Hitler could not be trusted and they agreed not to give in to him again.
1939: POLAND AND THE NAZI–SOVIET PACT Hitler now demanded the return of a part of Poland known as the Polish Corridor. This region had been taken away from Germany by the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler encouraged the Germans living in the area, and its chief city of Danzig, to demand union with Germany. Britain and France promised Poland that they would support her if Germany attacked. Hitler shocked the world by signing a treaty with his enemy, communist Russia. He thought this would stop Britain and France helping Poland. On 1 September 1939 Hitler invaded Poland. On 3 September Britain and France declared war on Germany.

Britain's policy of appeasement

Appeasement is the word used to describe British foreign policy under prime ministers Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain between 1935 and 1939. The policy was intended to avoid war and confrontation by discussion, negotiation and compromise. The policy was popular in Britain because the majority of people did not want another war. According to the Liberal MP Charles Masterman in his book England After War: A Study, published in 1922:
England is not interested in anything at all. It cares nothing about local, municipal or

Parliamentary politics. It is like a sick man resting after a great outletting of blood. […] The nervous system is dead. It can only respond to the strongest of stimulus.[17]

After two years of observing Hitler's aggressive foreign policy Baldwin was considering whether to abandon pacifism in favour of rearming Britain. He knew that although the British people were slowly beginning to change their views, pacifism was still popular while rearmament was not. Faced with such a decision, Baldwin resigned. He was succeeded as prime minister by Neville Chamberlain who believed that he could maintain peace.

Chamberlain believed that Hitler could be satisfied if he was given certain territories which he claimed as belonging to Germany. Hitler wished to unite all those Germans living in territories taken away by the Treaty of Versailles. Having received these territories, Chamberlain hoped that Hitler would behave reasonably, abide by signed agreements and settle future disputes around the conference table. He was convinced that Hitler did not want war and that he was as eager as he was to keep the peace.

Chamberlain's policy had a great deal of support in the country because of the strong pacifist sympathy. In Parliament he was supported by the Labour Party. A number of politicians even admired Hitler for his work in curing unemployment and for having overcome the economic depression in Germany. In 1936 Lloyd George even went so far as to meet Hitler in Germany, after which he publicly stated that the Chancellor was a man to be trusted. Chamberlain agreed and pointed out that since collective security under the League of Nations had failed, there was no alternative to his policy. Some of Chamberlain's conservative supporters thought that Hitler could be used as a defence against the spread of communism from the USSR. There was still some sympathy for the view that the Germans had been badly treated at Versailles and that they had the right to be united under one leader. Another important consideration is the fact that Britain was simply not ready for war; she had only begun to rearm and was unable to defend herself from a determined attack. Worse still was the fact that the economic depression had cut the amount of money Britain was able to spend on arms and the army.

On the other hand, there was a growing concern in the country that Britain should have little to do with the likes of Hitler. He was a fascist dictator who held power through fear and repression rather than by fair and democratic means. Chamberlain's own cabinet was split: Lord Halifax supported the policy of appeasement, but the Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden, believed that a firmer stand should be taken against Hitler. The most outspoken critic of the government's policy of appeasement was Winston Churchill who at this time was a backbench

[17] Charles Masterman, *England After War: A Study* (London, 1922), pp. 23-4.

Conservative MP. Few in government listened to him, but he was gaining support in the country for his views that, unless Hitler was stopped, war was inevitable.
In spite of Chamberlain's best efforts, Hitler continued to press ahead with his aggressive foreign policy. In 1938 Hitler forced his way into Austria claiming that his German-speaking fellow countrymen wished to unite with Germany. Chamberlain protested but took no action. This encouraged Hitler to go further and he began to demand self-determination for Germans living in the Sudeten area of Czechoslovakia. Hitler ordered Heinlein, leader of the Czech Germans, to mount marches and demonstrations demanding union with Germany. Chamberlain tried one last effort and persuaded Hitler to attend a four power peace conference (Italy, Germany, France and Britain) in Munich. Chamberlain and the French Prime Minister Daladier managed to persuade Hitler to sign an agreement which said that he could only take the Sudetenland. The four powers agreed to guarantee the independence of the rest of Czechoslovakia's territory. Hitler and Chamberlain also signed a declaration, which stated that they did not intend to go to war with one another. Chamberlain returned to Britain victorious and declared, 'I believe it is peace in our time.' There was a general feeling of relief throughout Britain and Chamberlain was regarded as a national hero. On the other hand, the Czech people felt betrayed.

In March 1939 German troops invaded and occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia. The Munich Agreement had lasted barely six months before it collapsed. Chamberlain was genuinely shocked and he needed little persuasion to adopt finally a more militant policy. Like Baldwin before him, he was faced with a choice: to keep giving in to Hitler or to stand up to him; in short, appeasement or rearmament. Chamberlain pressed ahead with rearmament and by 1939 nearly 20% of government expenditure was spent on arms and the armed forces. Some of Chamberlain's cabinet colleagues, like Lord Halifax, still firmly believed that it was possible to reason with Hitler and that war could be avoided; Chamberlain grudgingly disagreed.
The British and French assured Poland of their full support should Hitler demand the return of the Polish Corridor. They promised to declare war if German troops invaded the country. Lloyd George, Churchill and the Labour Party pressed the government for an alliance with Soviet Russia. However, the Conservatives could not set aside their deep distrust of communism and although negotiations were opened with Stalin they never really had much chance of success. Stalin feared a German attack, but he realised that the British and French could not be trusted, so in August an agreement was reached between him and Hitler. The Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact shocked the world; few could believe that these two bitter enemies were now friends. An invasion of Poland was inevitable since Hitler was now certain that the USSR would not come to her aid. To the last, Hitler gambled that

Chamberlain and the French government would rather talk than fight and that if he invaded Poland they would not declare war. So many times before Hitler had been right, but this time he was wrong.

The Prime Minister explained in a radio broadcast to the German people why he had declared war (4 September 1939):
He [Hitler] gave his word that he would respect the Locarno Treaty; he broke it. He gave his word that he neither wished nor intended to annex [take over] Austria; he broke it. He declared that he would not incorporate [include]the Czechs in the Reich [Empire]; he did so. He gave his word after Munich that he had no further territorial demands in Europe; he broke it. He gave his word that he wanted no Polish provinces; he broke it. He has sworn to you for years that he was the mortal enemy of Bolshevism [Communist Russia]; he is now its ally.[18]

Britain's preparations for war

In short, Britain was almost totally unprepared for war. Although Chamberlain had begun to rearm, it proved to be too little too late. The only part of Britain's armed forces that was ready and able to confront the enemy was the Royal Navy. The Royal Air Force was well trained and supplied with the best aircraft, but it was small. The army too was small, poorly trained and badly equipped. It would take time to ready Britain's armed forces for war. To increase the size of the army as quickly as possible, conscription was introduced. By the end of 1939 more than 1.5 million men had been conscripted to join the British armed forces. Of those, just over 1.1 million went to the British Army and the rest were split between the Royal Navy and the RAF.

On the other hand, preparations had been made to prepare the British people for war. The Emergency Powers (Defence) Act of 1939 gave the British government the power to take certain measures to defend the nation and to maintain public order. An organisation, Air Raid Precautions or ARP, was created as a response to the fears about the development of bomber aircraft and their threat. In 1938 the Air Ministry advised Chamberlain that in the event of war the country could expect to suffer 65,000 casualties a week from German bombing. In 1939 the Air Ministry revised its figures, suggesting that in the first month of war the government could expect a million casualties, three million refugees, and the destruction of over half of Britain's cities. Measures to control this devastation were largely limited to practical discussions about body disposal and the distribution of over a million burial forms to local authorities. At the outbreak of the war the British government ordered a million coffins.

[18] Historical Resources – http://goo.gl/IleBlt

To protect the people from bombing, the government ordered the construction of air-raid shelters or bomb shelters. During the Munich crisis, local authorities dug trenches to provide shelter. After the crisis, the British government decided to make these permanent, using a standard design of precast concrete trench lining. Individual families were advised to erect their own shelters, so the government supplied over a two million householders with Anderson shelters. Wardens were recruited and given the task of enforcing strict rules, such as the blackout, in the event of enemy bombing. It has been estimated that about half a million people volunteered to join the ARP. ARP wardens were to patrol the streets and warn householders against showing any lights. ARP wardens were also expected to advise householders and co-ordinate the emergency services – police, fire and ambulance.

The government also turned to new technology to help the country prepare for war. The development of radar became an important weapon in the nation's defence from German bombers. It was an object-detection system that used radio waves to determine the range, altitude, direction and speed of objects. It was used to detect aircraft by transmitting pulses of radio waves from a radar dish that bounced off any object in their path. It did not stop German bombers getting through, but it did help the small and heavily outnumbered RAF make their attacks more effective by targeting the largest concentration of enemy bombers. For those bombers that got through the RAF's fighters, the government deployed barrage balloons and anti-aircraft guns. Large barrage balloons were lifted and secured above the city of London to deter German bombers from coming in too low on their bombing runs. This affected the accuracy of German bombing, making it less effective. The deployment of thousands of anti-aircraft guns, backed with powerful searchlights for attacks during the hours of darkness, was another method devised by the government to defend the British people and the towns and cities in which they lived.

War came in September 1939. Germany invaded Poland and when Hitler refused to pull his troops out, Britain and France declared war. After four weeks the Poles surrendered. There was no bombing of Britain or fighting between Britain and Germany. The period between October 1939 and April 1940 is known as the phoney war. However, in April the war resumed when Germany attacked Norway and Denmark. In May the Germans attacked Holland, Belgium and France. The British army in France (British Expeditionary Force) fought alongside the French and Belgians, but after six weeks of fighting, the allies were defeated. France surrendered and the remains of the British army were evacuated home from Dunkirk. The British people now prepared for what they believed would be the invasion of Britain. To help defend the country, the government established the Home Guard which was made up of volunteers who were armed and trained to

resist invasion.

The following people were interviewed for a television programme called The Day War Broke Out (1989) and were asked to recall their memories of the time:
Mr McCrowarty of Glasgow: The Second World War was brought to the people. They didn't anticipate that, not at all. Although they knew that air raids would come. But the ordinary people, their attitude was: oh let these statesmen sort it out, you know. I don't think it will affect the ordinary man in the street. But they didn't know what was ahead of them.
Mrs Buckland of London: They had said that war had been declared, and then the sirens went. We were petrified. Anyhow, sometime afterwards, we were waiting for the guns to go, but we didn't hear anything, so that was the first day of the war. It was quite an exciting morning really, but it was sad to think that we were now at war.
Mr Barsley of Oxford: Well, September 3 1939, I looked up my diaries that I was still a pacifist then, at the outbreak of war, and I noted that when I heard the tired voice of Chamberlain announcing that we were at war, I thought, this is it, this is the end of a long journey, which has taken the wrong turning – and I am dead against it.
Mrs Barnicott of Plymouth: We had planned a family party but of course it was cancelled. My husband to be and my father spent the day digging a hole in the garden to put an Anderson shelter in. My parents were more upset than we were, because they had come through the last war, so they weren't so ignorant about it as we were.[19]

With so many men called up to serve in the armed forces the government was aware that it had to ensure a ready supply of skilled workers was available to maintain the war industries. A Schedule of Reserved Occupations was drawn up exempting certain key skilled workers from conscription. The schedule listed nearly five million men in a vast range of jobs including railwaymen, dockworkers, miners, war factory workers and farmers. Many in reserved occupations joined civil defence units such as the Air Raid Precaution and Home Guard.

How did people in Britain cope with the experience of war?

After the fall of France in June 1940, the British government warned its people to expect the worst: a massive bombing campaign against the ports and cities. Initially they were wrong. Although Hitler gave the order for a massed air offensive against Britain on 31 July, to be followed by an invasion in September, the Luftwaffe's main targets were the airfields of the RAF's fighter command and British shipping in the English Channel. Clearing the Channel of British warships, followed by control of the air above it, would enable the German invasion force to carry out its task unhindered. The Battle of Britain had begun.

[19] ITV documentary, *The Day War Broke Out* (1989).

The Battle of Britain was fought high above the countryside of southern England, watched by the British public. The RAF was heavily outnumbered having just 2,915 planes, of which a little over 1,200 were fighters, to combat 4,550 Luftwaffe aircraft. In the first five weeks of the battle, up to 6 September, the RAF lost nearly 20% of its strength; in one week alone 185 Spitfires and Hurricanes had been shot down.

The German losses were just as heavy, but they pressed ahead in the belief that the RAF could not hold out much longer. They were right but they did not know it. The RAF was saved from total destruction when the Germans changed their tactics to bombing cities instead of airfields. On 7 September a furious Hitler ordered the Luftwaffe to bomb London in retaliation for the RAF bombing of Berlin. The Blitz, the German word for 'lightning', had begun. The term 'Blitz' was coined and applied by the British press to describe the heavy and frequent bombing raids carried out over Britain in 1940 and 1941.

The Blitz: The bombing of British cities

Hitler ordered his bombers to concentrate their efforts on destroying Britain's industry and her towns and cities, of which London was the main target. He hoped to force the British government into surrendering by continuously bombing civilians and thereby damaging their morale. London was bombed every night from 7 September to 2 November; in all some 13,500 tons of high-explosive bombs were dropped in fifty-seven raids. Soon other cities were suffering mass bombing. On 14 November 1940 Coventry was raided for the first time. In that one night 554 people were killed, 50,000 houses and 400 shops were destroyed. Over the next two days German bombers returned to bomb what was left of the city.

In the face of mounting losses, the Germans switched to night bombing. This resulted in the dropping of new incendiary bombs which caused massive fires. On one night alone – 29 December 1940 – fire bombs caused over 1,300 fires to break out in the in the centre of London. In 1941 the Germans began to range further afield, bombing Belfast, Glasgow, Swansea, Cardiff and Liverpool (which was hit for eight nights in May causing the deaths of 2,000 civilians). The Blitz lasted from September 1940 until May 1941, during which 45,000 civilians were killed and three and a half million houses were either damaged or destroyed. For every civilian killed, thirty-five were made homeless.

Coping with the Blitz

Source F: A child made homeless by bombing. Coventry 1940. Wikimedia Creative Commons http://bit.ly/2ucCE1n

From the very first day of the war, the government had planned for the expected mass bombing. It set up Civilian Defence units like the ARP wardens, the Auxiliary Fire Service, the First Aid posts and the Auxiliary Ambulance Service. The civilian population had been issued with instructions on how to protect themselves by using air raid shelters. The two most famous were the Anderson shelter, which consisted of sheets of metal set in earth and covered by soil, and the Morrison shelter which was a large steel box to be set up in the home, usually under the stairs. There were also communal shelters for large numbers of people, while Londoners were fortunate enough to be able to use the Underground.

The Daily Mirror newspaper reported on the Blitz in daily bulletins. For example, on 9 September 1940 the paper reported two stories of bombing raids on London:
Fires Their Guide Some of the German machines appeared to turn over another district owing to the fierce A.A. [ack-ack from anti-aircraft guns] gunfire and flew back toward the coast without, apparently, reaching their main objective.
It was evident that the German airmen had used the smouldering fires of Saturday's raids to guide them, for the attacks were directed at the same area – London's dockland.
The first hour of the attack was considerably less formidable than Saturday's raid – fewer enemy planes were penetrating the intense defensive barrage from the coast to London. At the end of an hour there was a hushed lull.
Ten minutes passed – then, "like all hell let loose," the whole of London's defence barrage roared and crashed into action, heralding the return of the raiders.
Dull menacing crunches, whining and quivering reverberations were heard. Livid flashes leapt across the darkened sky as the planes dropped their bombs.
A.A.'s 3 In Minute The London area's first warning sounded as formations of raiders attempted a daylight attack.
As one big formation emerged from clouds over a south-east area, three Dorniers [German bombers] were blown to pieces within a minute by A.A. fire. The brilliant marksman was a gunner aged twenty-two.
When the planes were hit their bombs were released and fell over a wide area. Shops and cottages were badly damaged, but all the occupants escaped injury.

The bombs set light to a schoolroom at a boys' home and the matron's house. A master gave the alarm and the elder boys fought the flames.
Members of the Home Guard, disbanding after a church parade, captured one of the airmen who had baled out. He told them that four others were close.[20]

At first, the continuous night-time bombardment of Britain's cities and the resulting heavy casualties damaged morale. In England, one of the worst hit cities was Coventry. The infamous raid of 14 November 1940 brought the city to a standstill. 500 German bombers dropped 500 tons of explosives and nearly 900 incendiary bombs on the city in ten hours of unrelenting bombardment.
Daily Mirror, 9 September 1940, p.1.

Source G: Bombing raid in 1940 Wikimedia Creative Commons http://bit.ly/2v7Fz8h

Winston Churchill, who had replaced Chamberlain as prime minister, did what he could to raise people's morale by his stirring speeches, patriotic radio broadcasts and by touring the damaged areas. On the other hand, government censorship ensured that newspapers were not allowed to show pictures of damaged houses or mutilated corpses. Radio and cinema were told to concentrate on stories about the heroism of the rescue services. Fear, hate, destruction and government propaganda all contributed to an increased community spirit, a feeling of togetherness. The British people were determined to show Hitler that they could not be beaten and they tried to carry on their daily lives as normally as possible.

The Myth of the Blitz

Some historians have questioned this 'community spirit' and sense of 'fellowship' during the Blitz. In his article 'The Blitz: Sorting the Myth from Reality', James Richards acknowledges that the view of Britain as a nation that 'pulled together

[20] *Daily Mirror*, 9 September 1940, p.1.

under the Blitz' is a compelling (and popular) one, but he suggests that the reality is rather different from the heroic image:

The account of the Blitz – as Britain's major cities experienced a sustained and unrelenting bombardment by Nazi Germany – has been etched into our country's conscience ever since the war years. The question has to be asked, however, as to whether the subsequent victory in the war, and the following 60 years, have coloured the way in which it is now generally seen?
Our heritage industry has encouraged a 'Myth of the Blitz', that differs from the reality of wartime experience. The myth is that we all pulled together, that spirits were up as young and old, upper and lower classes muddled through together with high morale under the onslaught of the Nazis.

But the 'Myth of the Blitz' is just that – a myth. As members of the establishment were able to take refuge in country houses, in comfort and out of the way of the bombs, or in expensive basement clubs in the city, the lower-middle and working classes were forced to stay in the cities and face up to the deadly raids with inadequate provision for shelter.
It was a time of terror, confusion and anger. Government incompetence – almost criminal in its extent – displayed what was almost a contempt for ordinary people. It was time for the people to help themselves to the shelter they needed. It was a time of class war.[21]

The 'Myth of the Blitz' was promoted by the government which used its control over the media to present a picture of life going on as normal despite the constant bombing raids. The newspapers did not show photos of people known as 'trekkers' – the families who would spend the night away from their homes, preferably in local woodland or a park where they felt safer from attack. Such photos were censored. An American film, entitled London can take it, presented the image of a city devastated by bombs but one that carried on as normal. The narrator makes the point, 'Bombs can only kill people, they cannot destroy the indomitable spirit of a nation.' Of course, life was not quite as easy as propaganda suggested – London could take it but only because there was little else Londoners could do.

In Wales the most heavily bombed town was Swansea. For three nights in February 1941, 250 German aircraft raided Swansea dropping 1,320 high explosive bombs and around 56,000 incendiaries. The aim of the raid had been to destroy the town's docks and heavy industrial plants, but the Germans missed their targets and they bombed the centre of Swansea instead. The incendiaries caused fires to break out that could be seen more than fifty miles away. Civilian casualties were high, around 387, and the destruction to the town's buildings was great. Cardiff too had suffered,

[21] J. Richards, 'The Blitz: Sorting the Myth from Reality' *BBC History* online edn. 17 February 2011 http://goo.gl/JC01cf.

and in one raid alone, on 2 January 1941, 151 men, 147 women and 47 children were killed while some 600 houses were destroyed.

The following extracts were published by the South Wales Evening Post in an article entitled 'Memories of Swansea at War', published in 1988:
Mr Fifield: We lived in Greenfield Street throughout the war and we were right in the middle of it all. My family spent night after night in the concrete shelter opposite our house. I remember going up to St. Mary's to try and get the candlesticks and other articles out of the church. We went through it all and never had a cracked window in the house. We also had laughter at different things that happened . . . one night the warning went and the warden shouted 'Take cover'. One man dived under a van in Wassall Square. After it was all over, we saw the van on top of the Square and the man still on the road quite safe. I am now 80 years of age and I don't think that we will ever experience another time like that again. Not five minutes walk from our house they flattened everything.
Mr Mansell: I was one of the first twenty ARP wardens in Swansea. My ARP post was in Pottery Street that was bombed and then in Powell Street. One of the raids came when a messenger lad and I were on patrol, and bombs dropped . . . hitting a house in Cwm Terrace and Philaparts Lodging House. I sent my messenger lad to the post and started to get some of the men out. My messenger came back and helped until the rescue team arrived. Out of the 48 we managed to get 42 out alive. The messenger lad, Jack Evans, was awarded the Boy Scout's highest award for bravery.
Mrs Jenkins: My brother's wife lost three members of her family by a direct hit on their shelter in Bryn-Syfi Terrace in the February Blitz. After the burial, we went to the cemetery to see the grave. I was amazed to see five or six open graves, and soldiers still digging other graves. On asking one of the soldiers who all the graves were for, he replied: 'They are ready for the next Blitz.[22]

Evacuation

When war was declared the government put its plan for evacuation - known as Operation Pied Piper - into action. Evacuation was not made compulsory by the government because it feared that people might protest at being forced to leave their homes or their children. Therefore, from the very beginning of the war evacuation was always voluntary but very much encouraged. The government wanted to avoid women and children being killed because this would affect morale. The plan was for all women and children to be evacuated from likely targets like London to safe areas such as Wales. During the course of the war around 110,000 children were evacuated to Wales.

[22] 'Memories of Swansea at War' in the *South Wales Evening Post* (1988).

Wales was thought to be safe because it was mainly rural and it had fewer military targets than England. Some children were even sent abroad to Canada and the USA. In a number of cases, only children were evacuated since their parents had important city jobs which were vital for the war effort. Although most of the evacuees who came to Wales came from London and Birmingham, many Welsh women and children from Swansea, Cardiff and Newport were also evacuated to towns and villages in the country. In other cases, those who refused to be evacuated tended to leave the city at night before the bombing started and then return again in the morning when the bombers had gone. During the Blitz of Plymouth in 1940, over 50,000 people – ‘trekkers’ – left the city each night.

Evacuees and their host communities in Wales

In all, around one and a half million people moved around the country in search of safety. In the Rhondda valley alone, some 33,500 evacuees from London, Cardiff and Bristol were found temporary shelter in the homes of local people. This sometimes led to problems, and it was the job of the local billeting officers to try to help the evacuees and their host families to get on together. It was not unusual to find whole schools being taken over by families for whom accommodation could not be found in local homes. Life for the evacuees varied. A great deal depended on how well they got on with their host families and the local community. Since the majority of evacuees came from large towns and cities, they were not used to living in the country. Many city children, particularly those who came from the slums of the east end of London, found life in the country healthier and more exciting.

Although some evacuees experienced hardship at the hands of mean spirited and sometimes cruel host families, the majority found themselves in families happy to care for them. Genuine emotional bonds developed and some evacuees were reluctant to leave for home at the end of the war. The Carmarthen Journal reported that London-bound evacuees had experienced ‘Welsh hospitality at its best’.

Perhaps the most significant impact of evacuation on the host communities in Wales was on language and culture. In many areas English children were hosted by Welsh-speaking families which sometimes upset the linguistic balance in the community. On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that some English evacuees embraced the language and culture of their host communities and returned to their homes with an additional language!

Rationing

The British government knew that the Germans would follow the same plan that they had used in World War One which was to starve Britain into surrendering. The

Germans knew that Britain had to import nearly 40% of its food from abroad, so Hitler built up a large U-boat submarine fleet which he used to sink British merchant ships. For the first three years of the war the U-boats were very successful. In April 1941 alone over 700,000 tons of British shipping was sunk. On the Home Front the people were expected to make sacrifices in order to help beat the U-boat threat. The government set up the Ministry of Food and in January 1940 it introduced food rationing quickly, followed by clothes, petrol and coal rationing. By 1942 even water was being rationed and people were only allowed 13 cm of water in their weekly bath! Ration books were issued to everyone and the ration coupons could only be exchanged for goods like meat, eggs, butter and sugar at shops where people had registered. Some foods such as bread, most vegetables and potatoes were not rationed. But it was almost impossible to get hold of fruits like bananas, oranges and lemons, except on the black market where most rationed items could be bought illegally, but only for a high price.

One woman recalls how the shortage of food drove her to desperate measures: [She] saw a dog dashing out of a butcher's shop with a large piece of suet in his mouth, followed him on her bicycle and watched him bury the suet. 'When the dog was safely away I went to the spot … and confiscated the hidden treasure … I took that suet home, cut out the mauled part and then made suet pudding.[23]

The Ministry of Food's Dig For Victory campaign encouraged self-sufficiency; the number of allotments (pieces of land allocated to each family to grow food) rose from 815,000 to 1.4 million. Pigs, chickens and rabbits were reared domestically for meat, while vegetables were grown anywhere that could be cultivated. By 1940 wasting food became a criminal offence. One person's typical weekly allowance would be: one fresh egg; 4oz each of margarine and bacon (about four rashers); 2oz butter and tea; 1oz cheese; and 8oz sugar. Meat was allocated by price, so cheaper cuts became popular. Points could be pooled or saved to buy cereals, tinned goods, dried fruit, biscuits and jam. Rationing of some foodstuffs continued after the war and it did not end until 1955.

The contribution of Women to the war effort

An historian once said, 'It took a world war to give women freedom but two world wars to give them equality.' During the First World War, women were given the opportunity to prove their worth as industrial and agricultural workers and their contribution to the war effort was praised by contemporaries. However, once the war came to an end, so did their contribution to the industrial prosperity of Britain. Returning soldiers were given the jobs once done by women.

[23] N. Longmate, *How We Lived Then* (London, 2002), p.149.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the political leaders of Britain were in no doubt that they would be needed again. Thousands more women were recruited or conscripted for the war effort. They worked in factories making war materials, on the land growing food to feed the nation and in the hospitals tending to the sick and injured. In one munitions factory alone at Bridgend, some 7,000 people were employed and over 65% of them were women.

In 1942 Clement Attlee, Deputy Prime Minister, issued the following statement:
The work the women are performing in munitions factories has to be seen to be believed. Precision engineering jobs which a few years ago would have made a skilled [technician's] hair stand on end are performed with dead accuracy by girls who had no industrial experience.[24]

In 1942 Churchill was sent a report by the government's Labour Research Department which stated:
Thousands of women who want to volunteer find it difficult or impossible for them to undertake a war job. The most important reasons are: low wages, insufficient day nurseries, long working hours and consequent shopping difficulties and inadequate transport.[25]
Churchill ordered a review and reform of the system and a year later, in 1943, the government published a report entitled Women in War Work. Below is an extract:
In one factory the women are working from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. There is a waiting list of nearly 300 and in ten weeks the bonus payment has increased, absenteeism has dropped and there are no fatigue, shopping or transport problems, even though wages [£2.20 weekly] are ridiculously low.[26]

In addition to work in factories and engineering, many women signed up to the Women's Land Army which was given the task of increasing food production. The work on the farms was hard and poorly paid, but it proved vital in beating the losses from German U-boat attacks. The military too encouraged women to join – in the army, women joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), while those destined for the Air Force joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF).

The Women's Voluntary Service also contributed to the war effort. The WVS had one million members by 1943 and although the majority of them were elderly, they did whatever was needed. When the government called for scrap metal to be donated for the war effort, the Portsmouth WVS collected in four weeks enough scrap metal to fill four railway carriages. The government used this to encourage other women to do their bit for the war effort, and in a series of propaganda campaigns the key message was 'There's Not Much Women Can't Do'. The contribution of women to the war effort was immense. By the end of the war in 1945,

[24] Clement Atlee cited in N. Longmate, *How We Lived Then* (London, 2002), p. 337.
[25] Carol Harris, *Women at War, 1939-45* (Stroud, 2000).
[26] Virginia Nicholson, *Millions Like Us: Women's Lives During the Second World War* (London, 2011).

there were 450,000 women in the military and over 6 million in civilian war work.

How important was it to maintain people's morale during the war?

During times of war all governments try to control the news in order to conceal the truth; this is called censorship. In Britain as in Germany, every form of mass-media – radio, newspapers, magazines, cinema films and newsreels – were censored. The Ministry of Information was set up and given the task of managing the rules on censorship and propaganda. The aim was to ensure that the people only got to know what the government wanted them to know or what it thought they should know. Bad news was kept to a minimum so that information on military disasters and defeats was suppressed or kept secret.

The media and propaganda

The government claimed that the censorship laws were there to protect the people from lies, rumours and from German propaganda. William Joyce, nicknamed Lord Haw-Haw because of his posh voice, was a pro-Nazi Irish American. During the war he regularly broadcast to the British people from a radio station in Germany. His aim was to destroy British morale. The government indeed considered censoring his broadcasts until they discovered that most people treated him as a joke. On the other hand, the Daily Worker, a pro-communist newspaper, was banned because it criticised the government and the war effort. Of course, good news like military victories and other successes were not censored, but the truth of them was often exaggerated to make them look more than they were. This was propaganda. Both sides made great use of propaganda and this 'war of words' became an important weapon during the war because it helped to keep up people's morale.

The most effective weapon the British had was the BBC. It broadcast in Britain and abroad so that the people of the occupied countries too would be able to listen to the news. The BBC was so powerful because it was heard in the home via the radio. Radio broadcasts were the single most listened to form of news and entertainment.

One of the most popular radio programmes was Tommy Handley's It's That Man Again. To ensure that everyone was subjected to government controlled news and propaganda, posters were put up everywhere, ranging from motivational images to simple information exchange. The cinema was subjected to government regulation. The news was controlled as was the film industry which was used by the government to produce patriotic films. Some of the most popular and powerful films about the war were Went the Day Well?; The Day Will Dawn; Tomorrow We Live; and One of Our Aircraft Is Missing. Between them, radio and the cinema did much to mould the attitudes and opinions of the British people. It was an essential tool in the government's drive to shape and control public opinion.

Campaigns and appeals

If the government employed the media and propaganda to shape the thinking of the British public it used campaigns and appeals to make the people feel as if they were actually doing something for the war effort. The man most responsible for pushing the idea of campaigns and appeals to support the war effort was the Anglo-Canadian newspaper owner and businessman Lord Beaverbrook. In 1940 he had been drafted into the government by Churchill as Minister of Aircraft Production. One of his most successful campaigns was the Spitfire Fund which captured the imagination of the people through propaganda posters such as that shown.

Source I: A propaganda poster. Flickr Creative Commons http://bit.ly/2u8P5uu

To encourage people to contribute to the Spitfire Fund the Belfast Telegraph published headlines such as 'A Spitfire A Day Keeps The Nazis Away'. Other regional newspapers also spurred on their readers to give generously to the fund; one such was the South Wales Argus which supported the fund-raising work of Richard Davies the Mayor of Newport, under the headline: 'A Newport Spitfire will help the cause of humanity'. The people of Newport, like many across the country, were anxious to do their part and in July 1940 the town launched its appeal to raise the £5000 required to build a Spitfire. It has been estimated that of the 30,000 Spitfires built during the war the Fund was responsible for around 1,600.

Churchill's leadership as a war leader

Winston Churchill was born into a life of wealth and privilege in 1874. His father, Lord Randolph Churchill, was a respected Conservative politician. Winston became a soldier and then a journalist. It was as a war correspondent covering the Boer War 1899-1902, that he earned his reputation for courage and daring. In 1902 he entered politics as a Conservative MP but he later changed sides and joined the Liberals. He became friendly with Lloyd George and together they piloted many social reforms through Parliament. When the Great War broke out, Churchill was put in charge of the Royal Navy as First Lord of the Admiralty. He proved to be an energetic and efficient First Lord, but his plans for an attack on Turkey at Gallipoli ended in disaster. Churchill was blamed and he was forced to resign. Two years later, in 1917, the new prime minister, Lloyd George, brought Churchill back into the government as Minister of Munitions. Again he proved a worthy choice, working hard

to speed up the supply of munitions to the front.

When Lloyd George fell from power in 1922, Churchill stayed on in the government once more joining the Conservatives. In Parliament, Churchill was treated with suspicion by many fellow Conservatives because he had once been a Liberal; he was distrusted by the Liberals because he had defected to the Tories; he was positively hated by Labour because of his order to send in the troops to break the miners' strike at Tonypandy in 1910. As Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1924, he faced the almost impossible task of dealing with the economic depression. His cuts in government spending and his calls for reduction in wages made him unpopular. He remained as Chancellor until 1929; during this time he earned the hatred of the miners and the TUC for his efforts to break the General Strike in 1926. By 1929 he had quarrelled with many members of his own party and had become an outspoken critic of government policy.

He was particularly keen to persuade the government and the people of Britain not to trust Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler. He believed that the policy of appeasement was a mistake that would eventually lead to war. However few listened to his warnings about the dangers of communism, fascism and Nazism. The general public did not care to listen to him: they were afraid of the prospect of another war, so they preferred to believe in the peaceful foreign policy followed by Baldwin and Chamberlain. Churchill's way of dealing with the likes of Hitler seemed to them aggressive and therefore bound to lead to war.

What role did Winston Churchill play in World War Two?

Churchill had been out of power for over ten years by the time war broke out in September 1939. Churchill's warnings had proved correct, which persuaded an embittered Chamberlain to refuse him a role in the government. However, the mood in the country and in Parliament had changed and MPs were now in favour of Churchill becoming First Lord of the Admiralty. Chamberlain reluctantly agreed. As the war progressed Churchill gained in confidence and prestige. With the attack on France in May 1940, and after a powerful speech by Lloyd George telling him he should go, Chamberlain resigned. Some MPs were in favour of Chamberlain's deputy, Lord Halifax, becoming prime minister but it was finally agreed that Churchill was probably best suited to lead the new coalition government.

Churchill proved to be an outstanding wartime leader. He set about restoring the battered morale of the British people by giving stirring speeches and by making personal appearances in various parts of the country. Churchill toured the bombed cities to offer moral support when the Blitz was at its worst. Even when Britain

suffered serious setbacks such as at Dunkirk in May 1940, the defeat in the desert war in January 1941 and the fall of Singapore to the Japanese in February 1942, Churchill lifted the spirits of his fellow countrymen by appearing firm in the belief that they would win the war. Chuchill's first speech as prime minister (13 May 1940) stated:
You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival.[27]

Churchill's 'Drive to Victory' began at the battle of El Alamein in October 1942. Churchill's choice of general, Montgomery, to lead the British army in North Africa proved successful. The Germans were decisively defeated at El Alamein and again in Tunisia and Sicily. Churchill encouraged the allied generals to invade Italy in July 1943 and France (D-Day) in June 1944. His hard work ensured that the allied war leaders, Roosevelt of the USA and Stalin of the USSR, set aside their differences in order to defeat Hitler and Germany.

To the majority of the British people, the allied victory in 1945 was due largely to Churchill's inspired leadership. Yet he had his enemies. The Labour politician Aneurin Bevan criticised Churchill's leadership throughout the war. In July 1942 he criticised Churchill's failure to achieve success in the war; he even called for a 'No Confidence' debate. Churchill won. Churchill also made mistakes. In an attempt to cash in on his popularity, he called an election in July 1945. He lost. He had badly misjudged the mood of the people. This did not damage his personal reputation. Most people rejected his politics rather than the man who, they agreed, had won the war.

Source J: Churchill, an outstanding wartime leader.
© **Pictorial Press / Alamy**

For many people, his stubborn refusal to admit defeat during World War Two has given him a reputation few other politicians have ever achieved. After a brief period as prime minister, 1951-55, Churchill retired. He died in 1965.

[27] 'Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat', *The Churchill Centre*, online edn. can be seen at http://goo.gl/OPV0wA.

How difficult were conditions in Britain in 1945?

In September 1945 World War Two came to an end. After six years of conflict the wartime allies – Britain, the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics – emerged victorious. However, the British were to pay a heavy price for victory: the world war had brought economic ruin and the loss of her empire.

The economic position of Britain in 1945

Britain had spent close to £7 billion, or a quarter of the national wealth, on the war effort. Factories that had once built cars, fridges, cookers and vacuum cleaners were turned to the mass production of tanks, guns, bullets and bombs. By the end of the war Britain was £3,355 million in debt. The only country to emerge from the war intact, and in profit, was the USA. The country's massive industrial strength largely won the war for the allies. As soon as the war was over American factories were able to turn quickly from producing war materials to consumer goods. Unfortunately, war-damaged Britain was no longer able to compete. Her industries were unable to match the Americans' industries in terms of the speed of change or the volume of their consumer goods production.

Much of war-damaged Europe was in no state to buy British goods. Her traditional overseas markets, which had been in decline even before the war, were effectively killed off by the disruption caused by the conflict. It took American aid, under the Marshall Plan, to rebuild the shattered economies of Europe, so it was to America that these new countries turned for support. On the other hand, America's wartime aid to Britain was stopped in August 1945; the country was forced to fend for itself. Britain was no longer in a position to offer either financial or political support to anyone.

It was clear that Britain was no longer a world power. She had been overtaken by the USA and the USSR who became world superpowers. Britain was militarily and economically weak. Because she was unable and unwilling to pay for a large army or navy, she was not in a position to stop the British Empire from breaking up. In 1947, India, Britain's prize possession, was given independence. Soon other countries followed suit so that the idea and the reality of the British Empire gradually died. In its place the British government encouraged the concept, first used in 1931, of a Commonwealth of Nations made up of former colonies.

Yet, despite the economic problems it was not all doom and gloom in post-war

Britain. The country had won a war, there was full employment, the shipyards and coal mines were working to full capacity again and there was an air of expectation of a better future. Attitudes were changing. The majority of the British people did not want a return to pre-war depression and unemployment and they no longer cared as much as they once did about the empire. In the election of 1945 they were given the opportunity to vote for change. It was clear to all that post-war Britain was no longer 'Great': the United Kingdom was no longer a great military or imperial power neither was it a great economic power. Great Britain had begun its post-war decline.

The Beveridge Report

One of the most significant impacts of the war was on government attitudes and ideas. The socialists, mainly Labour, and other more progressive members of the government, realised that the war would give them an opportunity to change and reshape British society. While Churchill concentrated on winning the war, his deputy in the coalition government, Clement Attlee, was focused on planning for peace. As the leader of the Labour Party, Attlee was keen to put his socialist principles into practice. In 1942 William Beveridge published a report entitled Social Insurance and Allied Services: Report (commonly known as the Beveridge Report). In it, he set out the kind of social reforms that he thought the government should carry out after the war. His report pointed out that there were five 'Giant Evils' in society that had to be tackled by the government before it could properly care for its people. These 'Giant Evils' were 'Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness'. The Beveridge Report called for a series of radical reforms to deal with each of these.

The content of the report was far too radical for Churchill, but he reluctantly agreed to accept parts of it. His main aim was to win the war. On the other hand, his deputy in the war cabinet, Clement Attlee, praised the report and he adopted it as part of the Labour Party's policies. His main aim was to win the peace. The majority of the British people welcomed the report but there were some who opposed it. Many Conservatives thought the reforms would be too expensive or that they would destroy 'self-help and self-reliance in the ordinary man and woman'. The pro-Tory Daily Telegraph printed the headline 'Half-way along the road to Moscow'. It thought Beveridge's report was a blueprint for Russian-style communism. The pro-Labour Daily Mirror hit back with the headline, 'Hands off the Beveridge Report.' It claimed the report was a blueprint for caring socialism.

The following is an extract from a letter written by Vita Sackville-West to her husband, a wealthy Conservative MP in 1942:
I hope that the Beveridge Report gets whittled away. I am all for educating the people into being less awful, less limited, less silly, and for spending lots of money on extended education, better paid teachers, but not for giving them everything for

nothing, which they don't appreciate anyhow.
Health, yes. Education yes. Old age pensions, yes I suppose so, but not this form of charity which will make people fold their arms and feel that they need have no enterprise since everything will be provided for them. It is surely [an] error!

Beveridge faced a formidable task in putting together a coherent plan for post-war social reconstruction. What he came up with extended hugely the framework of national insurance first put in place before the First World War by David Lloyd George. Every British citizen would be covered, regardless of income or lack of it. Those who lacked jobs and homes would be helped. Those who were sick, would be cured. The process of planning for the new, radical post-war welfare state had begun. Dealing with war damage

War damage and demobilization

However, alongside the planning of a welfare state, the government also had to deal with the other, more visible, effects of the war. At the end of the war, Britain was a severely war-damaged nation. Britain's cities and large towns had been bombed during the war and although the damage varied, the centres of some towns and cities like Swansea and Coventry were almost completely destroyed. Thousands of shops, factories, 20 per cent of schools and above all, houses had been damaged or destroyed; these would need rebuilding. But it all cost money, so the government decided to concentrate on building houses for the thousands of homeless people. In the meantime 563 army camps were opened to the public and used as temporary homes. In Kent, the local council had nearly 1,300 homeless families but only 120 empty houses. It decided to hold a lottery: 1,300 people drew lots for the 120 houses. In its first year of government Labour built 22,000 houses and erected 41,000 temporary or prefabricated homes known as prefabs. These were only meant to last for five years by which time it was thought there would be enough permanent homes available.

The demand for affordable homes rose significantly in the period between 1945 and 1947 because of returning servicemen and women. In 1945 the British army, navy and air force had over five million men and women in their ranks. The vast majority had been conscripted to serve only for as long as the war lasted and they now wanted to return home. Demobilisation was begun within six weeks of the end of the war. Ernest Bevin, the Minister of Labour and National Service, was put in charge of the demobilisation plan. The majority of service personnel were to be released from the armed forces according to their 'age-and-service number', which was calculated from their age and the months they had served in uniform. To assist with Britain's post-war reconstruction, Bevin drew up a list of so-called 'key men' whose vital occupational skills enabled them to be released ahead of their turn. Given the

country's weak economic position, it was felt that reducing the size of the armed forces would save the government money. Given the scale of the war damage, the government was confident that the millions of ex-servicemen and women would find work and thereby ease themselves back into civilian life.

Source K: The aftermath of German bombing. © Granger, NYC / Alamy

Austerity Britain

However, finding work proved more difficult than had been anticipated. Britain's weak economic position meant that jobs were harder to find, and between 1947 and 1951 unemployment rose from 400,000 to 1.75 million. Families that had been separated for a number of years now had to learn to readjust. One indicator of the social problems that this caused was the post-war divorce rate which rose significantly between 1945 and 1948. In one year alone (1947) nearly 70,000 applications were processed in the courts. Another unexpected effect of the war was the continuation of shortages and rationing. With the war at an end, many people thought that rationing would also come to an end; they were to be disappointed. Although the supply of most foods, raw materials and machinery improved, shortages of some foods like bread and potatoes, along with petrol, coal and clothes continued. In fact rationing for some items did not end until 1955.

'Dreariness is everywhere,' wrote one schoolteacher in 1948. 'Streets are deserted, lighting is dim, people's clothes are shabby and their tables bare.'[28] This opinion best describes what austerity Britain meant to the people that lived through it. In the period from 1945 to 1951 Britain was undernourished, dirty and class-ridden. After nearly six years of war, people were exhausted. Queues formed outside bakers' shops early each morning and over a third of the 12 million dwellings had no bath or hot water. In 1948 the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Stafford Cripps,

[28] Cited in David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945-1951* (London, 2007), p. 298.

introduced an austerity budget including a wage freeze. He told the Trades Union Congress, 'There is only a certain sized cake. If a lot of people want a larger slice they can only get it by taking it from others.'[29] This was the reality of post-war 'poverty' Britain.

The 1945 General Election

Within two weeks of the end of the war in Europe – in May 1945 – the coalition government led by Winston Churchill broke up. Although Churchill did not want to end the coalition, he was given no choice by his deputy Clement Attlee, the leader of the Labour Party, who refused to support him any longer. Attlee argued that Churchill and the coalition government was a wartime arrangement which had done its job. The war had been won and it was now time to win the peace. Churchill resigned and called a general election for 5 July 1945.

The election was fought mainly between the Conservatives, led by Churchill, and Labour, led by Attlee. The Liberal Party, led by Sir Archibald Sinclair, had shrunk in size and it was no longer the power it once was. The Conservatives believed that they would win because of Churchill's fame and popularity as the man who had won the war. Attlee was not so confident of victory, but he believed that his party's promises of radical social and economic reform would turn many people away from supporting the Tories. He was right. In order to allow the five million servicemen and servicewomen abroad to vote, the election results were not announced until 26 July. The Labour Party won a massive victory and it was returned to power with the largest majority in its history. Even though the people still admired Churchill and cheered him, they had decided to vote against him.

Derek Brown, a journalist writing for The Guardian newspaper in 2001, summed up the significance of the 1945 election: 'The outcome of the 1945 general election was more than a sensation. It was a political earthquake.'[30] There are a number of reasons why the election was so significant:

- The defeat of Winston Churchill, the man who had won the war, was a shock. Many people thought that like David Lloyd George in the Great War, he was certain to be re-elected because he had led the country to victory.
- It was the first election for ten years and the first to be held after a bitterly fought world war.
- This was a great example of people power – the people did not want to return to the depression-hit 1930s, they wanted change.
- The victorious 1945 Labour government had the opportunity to shape the political, economic and social landscape of Britain for decades to come. Not since the reforming Liberal governments of pre-Great War Britain had a political

[29] Full quotation to be found in *The Monthly Labor Review* 65(5) (November 1948), p. 511.

party been in a position to potentially transform the country. Why did Labour win the election so convincingly? The size of Labour's victory surprised many people including some of the party's own supporters. Although Winston Churchill was hugely popular, his party was not. Few could forget the depression, economic slump, unemployment and appeasement of pre-war Conservative Britain. Fewer still were willing to forgive the Conservative government for many of the failures of the 1930s. The Manchester Guardian newspaper's verdict on the Conservative defeat was typical of the time, ' . . . the country has preferred to do without Churchill rather than to have him at the price of having the Tories too.'

The Tory election campaign was a disaster. The party concentrated on Churchill's personality and war record. One Conservative campaign slogan said, 'Help him finish the job.' However, the British people were keen to put the war behind them – they wanted to look forward. Worse still was the disaster of Churchill's election broadcast of 4 June when he said:
There can be no doubt that socialism is inseparably interwoven with totalitarianism and the abject worship of the state. Socialism is in its essence an attack not only upon British enterprise, but upon the right of the ordinary man or woman to breathe freely without having a harsh, clumsy tyrannical hand clasped across their mouth and nostrils. [Labour] would have to fall back on some form of Gestapo, no doubt very humanely directed in the first instance.[31]
The pro-Tory Daily Express newspaper printed the headline 'Gestapo in Britain if Socialists win'. The British people were disgusted by this attempt to compare Labour to Hitler's secret police.

Churchill misjudged the mood of the people but Attlee did not. This was the first election for ten years and Attlee knew that attitudes had changed. He was also aware that the people were hoping for a better and fairer Britain after the war. His party concentrated on a positive election campaign with the slogan 'Let us face the future together'. Labour promised jobs, fair wages, good houses, pensions for the old, free education and free medicine and health care. They also promised to rebuild the nation's economy and to return the country to prosperity. The British people were ready for this 'different Britain'.

How did the Labour government deal with the problems of the time?

Having won the general election, the new Labour government was faced with the task of fulfilling the promises it had made to the British people. In turn, the British people expected a great deal from Labour. There was a general feeling that the country must not be allowed to 'fail' again, as it had done after 1918. The task facing Labour was a massive one. The country was suffering from the effects of

[30] Derek Brown, '1945-51: Labour and the creation of the welfare state', *The Guardian*, online edn. 14 March 2001. http://goo.gl/xeWL8F
[31] Cited in '1945 General Election', *HistoryLearningSite.co.uk,* online edn. 2011. http://goo.gl/JH3l8x

war damage and this would have to be put right before they could begin to put their plans for social and economic reforms into action.

Key politicians

Few complained about the shortages because they had been used to them for so many years during the war. The people knew that the improvements promised by the government would take some time to have an effect. They were willing to wait because they trusted the members of Clement Attlee's government to do the job. Men like Aneurin 'Nye' Bevan, the Minister for Health and Housing, Emanuel 'Manny' Shinwell, the Minister for Power and Coal, Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary, Stafford Cripps, the Minister for Trade, Hugh Dalton, the Chancellor of Exchequer and John Strachey, the Minister for Food were regarded as honest and hard-working. Even during the worst of the hard winter weather of 1947, people were able to joke, 'We starve with Strachey and shiver with Shinwell.' Although the prime minister, Clement Attlee, was a quiet, shy man he was a powerful and well-respected leader who managed to keep his promises to the people.

From the cradle to the grave: The Beveridge Report

Once in power, the Labour government set about dealing with Beveridge's 'Giant Evils'. They concentrated on providing income security, better health, education, housing and full employment. One of the government's chief ministers, Aneurin Bevan, was keen to emphasise the Labour government's commitment to establishing a system of family allowances and to setting up a free national health service. His vision was a nation that took care of its people 'from the cradle to the grave'. In achieving this goal, the government concentrated on income security. In 1946 a proud Attlee introduced the first of Labour's social reforms. Addressing a packed Parliament he announced, 'This Bill is founded on the Beveridge Report.' It was the National Insurance Act. The act provided benefits for pregnant women and the unemployed, pensions for the retired and allowances for the sick, widowed and mothers with children. Later that same year the Industrial Injuries Act provided compensation for injured workers.

Source L: A Labour party campaign poster.
© Lebrecht / Alamy

The minister responsible for this important act was James Griffiths, MP for Llanelli, a talented

Welshman and former miner from Betws near Ammanford. Griffiths followed this up in 1948 with the National Assistance Act which provided the 'safety net' 'to assist persons . . . without resources or whose resources must be supplemented'. The Poor Law and the workhouses were abolished and the Unemployment Assistance Boards (UAB) of the 1930s were scrapped. By 1949 just over a million people, mainly the old, were receiving assistance under this act.

Providing jobs

The Ministry of Labour was determined that the nation should never again experience the humiliation of mass unemployment. In 1948 the Employment and Training Act attempted to establish a skilled workforce. It gave funds for training school leavers and for retraining others for different forms of employment. People who lived in the once distressed areas such as Wales were given the opportunity to become competitive in the world of work. By 1947 unemployment in Wales was registered at only 5.2 per cent or 44,000 people.

Aneurin Bevan and the setting up the NHS

The National Health Service Act of 1946 is perhaps the best known of all Labour's social reforms. Its aim was ambitious: to establish a health service that 'shall be free of charge' and available to everyone. This was a radical change. Although Lloyd George and the Liberal governments of 1906-14 had established a free health service for insured workers, their wives and children had to pay for treatment. Visits to and from the doctor, medicine, spectacles and dental treatment all had to be paid for. For the many who could not afford to pay for medical care, their health, teeth and eyesight suffered; some even died. The bill had its supporters as well as its critics, but on 5 July 1948 it became law. By 1949 8.5 million people had received dental treatment, 5.75 million pairs of glasses had been issued and some 187 million prescriptions had been written. By 1951 only 1.5 per cent of the population remained outside the NHS but the service was expensive to run, costing around £355 million a year.

The man largely responsible for the setting up of the NHS was Aneurin Bevan, the Minister of Health. In a speech in 1946, he outlined his vision:
Medical treatment should be made available to rich and poor alike in accordance with medical need and no other criteria. Worry about money in a time of sickness is a serious hindrance to recovery, apart from its unnecessary cruelty. The records show that it is the mother in the average family who suffers most from the absence of a full health service. In trying to balance her budget she puts her own needs last. No society can call itself civilised if a sick person is denied medical aid because of lack of means. The essence of a satisfactory health service is that the rich and poor

are treated alike, that poverty is not a disability and wealth is not advantaged.[32]

However, not everyone was in favour of a National Health Service. Some doctors resented the fact that they might be forced to work for the state. They valued their independence and their large salaries. The British Medical Journal, published in January 1946, outlined their concerns:
If the Bill is passed no patient or doctor will feel safe from interference by some ministerial . . . regulation. The Minister's spies will be everywhere, and intrigue will rule.[33]

The Daily Sketch newspaper shared the doctors' concerns:
The Bill threatens the independence of the general practitioner. The doctors have a justifiable dread of becoming government servants.[34]
The Daily Mail newspaper reported the birth of the NHS in an editorial published in 1948:
On Monday morning you will wake in a New Britain, a state which takes over its citizens six months before they are born, providing care and free services for their birth, their schooling, sickness, workless days, widowhood and retirement. Finally, it helps pay the costs of their departure. All this, with free doctoring, dentistry and medicine – free bath chairs, too, if needed – for 4/- 11d [25p] of your weekly pay packet.[35]

In his book, Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980, published in 1981, the historian Kenneth O. Morgan described the impact of the NHS in Wales:
The National Health Service, the creation of a distinguished son of the valleys, Aneurin Bevan, was especially popular here. It was popular, so it appeared, even amongst Welsh doctors, with perhaps a stronger involvement in the local community than some of their English counterparts. The Lancet [an official magazine for doctors] noted that a higher proportion of general practitioners in Wales (37 per cent) than in England agreed to operate under the Health Service in 1947 without waiting for the approval of the . . . British Medical Association.[36]

Source M: A free national health service for everyone. © H. Armstrong Roberts / Alamy

On 29 April 1951 a biographical profile of the minister of health appeared in The

[32] See *National Health Service Sources*. http://goo.gl/ROIDSL
[33] Cited in http://goo.gl/QnZHH6
[34] Cited in Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan: a biography* (2 vols, London, 1973), ii, p. 142.
[35] *Daily Mail,* 3 July 1948.
[36] Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980* (Oxford, 1981) pp. 345-6

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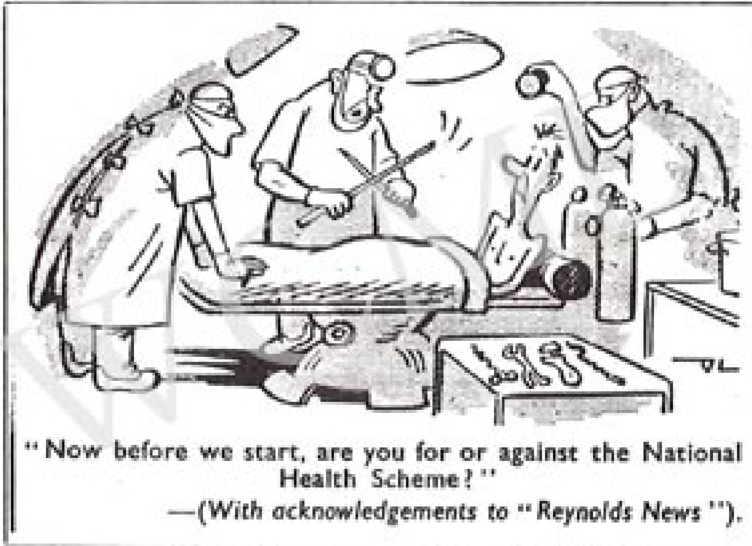
"Now before we start, are you for or against the National Health Scheme?"
—(With acknowledgements to "Reynolds News").

Source N: The patient's dilemma. Unable to trace copyright, please contact us if you are the copyright holder

Observer newspaper:
Aneurin Bevan was born in 1897 in the mining town of Tredegar . . .
The social setting in which his adolescent character . . . matured was the South Wales coalfield before and during the First World War. It was the grimmest part of the United Kingdom, the part that felt itself . . . least connected with the war against the Kaiser [Germans]. . .
While . . . Lloyd George was becoming the father of this country in its hour of need . . . the young Aneurin, . . . an industrial 'dead-end kid', was rejecting the ways of his fathers [his father's generation]. He felt he knew better what were the real needs of his generation, and that patriotism was not a useful emotion.
The only part of his father's outlook [ideas] he adopted was that expressed by the Tredegar Workingmen's Medical Aid Society (a miniature National Health Service). His father was one of its founders, and Aneurin fought his first battle with a local outpost [branch] of the British Medical Association when they wished to boycott the [rival] miners' society. The only ideas he accepted from Lloyd George were those of his National Insurance Act . . .
In the thirties, he did not visit the countries threatened or seized by Fascism, as Ellen Wilkinson [MP for Jarrow] did, but consolidated [strengthened] his position in Monmouthshire and spoke in the House [of Commons] on coal. He will not be remembered for his warning speeches against Hitler. . . but for his violent wartime onslaughts [attacks] on Churchill. And, since the war, . . . [he] concentrated on domestic issues – despite the evident crisis of the world . . .
Much the most solid and constructive effort of his political career is, of course, the establishment of the National Health Service. It is easy to see how his early training had equipped him to out-manoeuvre [take on] the doctors – he turned their flank and captured them by playing to the calloused appetite for power and money of some

great consultant physicians [he defeated them by playing to their appetite for power and money]. And his driving motive was plain – his own experiences had given him ample reason to believe sincerely in the need for a free medical service for the poor. What is more surprising is his administrative success. He not only established the [health] service promptly, despite all obstacles, but earned the regard [respect] of his own civil servants. This may be the one episode in his career which justifies comparisons in stature between him and Lloyd George.[37]

The Observer's biographical sketch was written to mark Bevan's resignation from the government. His resignation was due to the government's introduction of prescription charges for medicines. This 'tax' on health, as he called it, was, in his opinion, a betrayal of the principle of free health care at the point of delivery. His passion for helping the poor and needy and his outspoken attacks on those he accused of betraying the British working class won him few friends. He even quarrelled with members of his own party. However, friend and foe alike respected him.

The National Health Service remains Labour's greatest achievement. It was achieved only after two years of bitter resistance by the medical establishment, with consultants threatening strike action and the British Medical Association pouring out gloomy warnings about bureaucracy and expense. As events were to show, some of those warnings proved to have more than a grain of truth, and the government was forced to retreat from its first grand vision of free, comprehensive health care for all. In the beginning, everything was provided: hospital accommodation, GP cover, medicine, dental care, and even spectacles. But with Britain showing few signs of economic growth and prosperity, the budgetary burden was enormous. In 1951 the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Gaitskell, was obliged to reintroduce charges for NHS false teeth and glasses. Aneurin Bevan and a future Labour leader and prime minister, Harold Wilson, stormed out of government. This marked the beginning of the end of the great reforming post-war Labour government.

Educational opportunities following the 1944 Act

The Attlee government is regarded by many as one of the great reformist administrations of the twentieth century. It is perhaps ironic that the impetus for the more durable reforms came from outside the Labour Party. For example, the man responsible for the reform in education was not a member of the 1945 Labour government. He was the Conservative MP, R. A. Butler (known as RAB), who was the minister at the Board of Education in Churchill's wartime coalition government. He responded to Beveridge's Report by passing the 1944 Education Act. By this act, he hoped to destroy ignorance by establishing free primary and secondary education, and by offering every child 'diversity and equality of opportunity'.

[37] 'Profile – Aneurin Bevan', *The Observer*, 29 April 1951, p. 2

Unfortunately, he was never given the chance to fully implement the terms of the act due to the war and the lack of money. In 1947 the Labour government passed the act into law.

The act made secondary education compulsory until the age of 15 years and provided meals, milk and medical services at every school. An examination at age 11 years (called the eleven plus) placed children in different types of schools, according to their ability. Those who passed this exam went to grammar schools and were expected to continue their studies beyond the age of 15 years, possibly go to university and get professional jobs. Children who failed the exam were not expected to stay at school after 15 years and were expected to get mainly unskilled jobs.

The Labour government calculated that in order to deliver this equitable education, they needed to provide at least 60,000 new teachers, over half a million new school places and replace or repair over five thousand schools destroyed or damaged during the war. This act was important because it offered the country new educational policies that were innovative. The education reforms were successful because many students gained a good basic education and a large number acquired the skills necessary to secure employment.

Housing: The 'Homes for All' policy

Beveridge had identified poor or slum housing as one of his 'giants' with which future governments would have to deal. Beveridge considered poor housing to be one of the major factors behind poverty and despair in Britain. The war had made this problem worse because a substantial part of the nation's housing stock (estimated to be nearly four million dwellings) had either been destroyed or damaged during the German bombing campaign. Little could be repaired or rebuilt during the war which is why the chronic shortage of housing became one of the major problems facing the post-war Labour government. Under Aneurin Bevan, the Labour government followed an ambitious policy called 'Homes for All'.

One of the solutions to the housing shortage was for the government to build pre-fabricated homes, which became known as 'pre-fabs'. These were mass-produced and by 1948 nearly 130,000 had been assembled and distributed to areas in most need. 'Pre-fabs' were meant to be temporary, but many were so well-built that they lasted for decades. The government also spent time and money building good-quality council homes and flats. In contrast, the building and sale of private homes was restricted by a government determined to see to the needs of the poorest members of society. The policy was largely successful, but the damage done during the war was so severe that a shortage of good-quality housing continued to be a problem until the 1960s.

Source O: Girls at Bourne Secondary Modern School, Ruislip, Middlesex were among the first pupils to benefit from the new education act. © Harrison / Stinger / getty images

Nationalisation

Labour's commitment to economic change was as important as its social reforms. The government wanted to introduce radical measures to ensure that British industry would become more efficient and competitive. Attlee thought that the only way to achieve this aim was by nationalising all the key industries in Britain. Nationalising meant transferring the industries from private ownership to government control. These industries included coal, gas, electricity, transport, the airlines and iron and steel. He argued that some of these industries needed massive investment in order to modernise them.

The Conservatives, together with many businessmen and many industrialists, opposed nationalisation. In 1949 the Conservatives, led by Churchill, fought hard to prevent the Act for the Nationalisation of Iron and Steel from going through Parliament. Although the act was passed in the House of Commons, the Conservative majority in the House of Lords held up the act for nearly a year.

The policy of nationalisation also made sense for other reasons. The Labour Party had long believed that it was wrong for just a few owners and shareholders to profit from these key industries; they should profit everyone. Therefore it felt that the workers would benefit from being employed in state-run industries because they would be working for the nation and for themselves. Their rights would be protected by national guidelines guaranteed by the government. In all, Labour managed to nationalise around 20 per cent of the economy.
The following industries were nationalised between 1946 and 1950:
1946 The Bank of England The Coal Mines

1947 Cable and Wireless Electricity
1948 Transport
1949 Gas Iron and Steel

According to historian Peter Lane:

Socialists hoped that nationalisation would lead to a ‘happier’ people – the workers would feel a ‘new’ pride in ‘their’ industry and consumers would feel an equal pride in the industries which they ‘owned’. Profits made from state controlled industries would be used either to reduce taxation or to increase spending on welfare provision.[38]

The problems facing the government in trying to nationalise so many important industries can best be seen by looking at the coal industry. In 1947 there were 1,500 collieries in Britain owned by over 800 companies employing nearly 260,000 men. The government had to compensate these companies before taking over the collieries. The whole process was very complicated and expensive. With millions

Source P: The coal industry in public hands . . . ‘on behalf of the people’. © Topham Picturepoint topfoto.co.uk

spent on compensation, millions more was spent on investment in new technology and machinery. Between 1948 and 1952 the government invested nearly £32 million in coal mines in the south Wales region alone. In spite of opposition, and the problems in forcing through nationalisation, by 1950 the government controlled about 20 per cent of British industry.

[38] Peter Lane, *British History: 1750 to the Present Day* (London, 1982).

Historian Kenneth O. Morgan thought that the policy of nationalisation was not only right but benefited the hard-working Welsh miners and their families. He states:

For the Welsh miners and their families, nationalisation meant the fulfilment of a fifty-year dream, the reward for all the suffering endured from Black Friday [1926 Strike] onwards. No tears were shed for the old private coalowners. With their record in regard to managerial efficiency, production levels, pit safety, and above all relations with their workers, they had few friends. Perhaps they did not deserve any. They then proceeded to deny historians public access to their records deposited at public expense in the National Library of Wales.
. . . the taking of basic industries into public ownership – and this applied to the nationalisation of iron and steel as well . . . – did coincide with, and helped promote, a more thriving and harmonious atmosphere in the Welsh industrial scene.[39]

The reaction to Labour's post-war policies

Labour's election victory in 1945 had been a huge surprise, but their electoral defeat in 1951 was a massive shock. Why? The tide had begun to turn against Labour in the 1950 election. Labour won that election, but only just. Although there was still a great deal of support for Labour's plans to maintain or even to extend the Welfare State, the public were simply not prepared to pay for it. Under Labour, the burden of taxation had increased and it remained high in 1950-1. The Conservatives knew that no matter how worthy the cause, high taxes are never popular. Unfortunately for Labour, the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 made matters worse. The British government had to send an army to fight with the United Nations. This led to rearmament, which caused even higher taxes. The war was unpopular.

Middle-class voters were especially resentful at having to pay higher taxes. Even though the war had been over for some time, there was still rationing. Inflation was beginning to rise which caused prices to go up. There was a general feeling in the country that living standards had fallen under Labour.

The public's response to the policy of nationalisation was disappointingly mixed. It was welcomed in south Wales and popular in the north of England, but elsewhere the response was rather lukewarm. Many people believed that Labour had gone too far and that there was too much government interference in the running of the economy. Some were afraid that if Labour had another massive election victory they might move away from socialism to communism. The Conservatives played on this fear and they began to convince the middle classes to desert Labour.

[39] Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980* (Oxford, 1981) p. 311.

After some six years in office the Labour government was exhausted. Some of its most talented members either died, like Bevin, or retired, like Cripps. Others such as Bevan resigned because they were unhappy with some of the government's policies. In an effort to unite his party, Attlee decided to call an election. It was a huge mistake. A divided Labour Party stood little chance against a united Conservative Party full of new ideas and led by the war hero Churchill. Under the slogan 'Set the people free' (from socialism), the Conservatives swept to victory in 1951. Labour's dream appeared to be over.

The Labour government was one of the most radical of the twentieth century, presiding over a policy of nationalising major industries and developing and implementing the 'cradle to grave' welfare state. To this day the creation of Britain's publicly funded National Health Service, under the Health Minister Aneurin Bevan, is considered its greatest achievement.

Table 1: British Election Results (1950-1)

	Conservatives	**Labour**	**Liberals**
1950	12.5 million votes (43.3% of votes) 298 seats	13.3 million votes (46.5% of votes) 315 seats	2.6 million votes (9.1% of votes) 9 seats
1951	13.7 million votes (48% of votes) 321 seats	13.9 million votes (48.8% of votes) 295 seats	0.7 million votes (2.5% of votes) 6 seats

This resource is provided to support the teaching and learning of GCSE History. The materials provide an introduction to the main concepts of the topic and should be used in conjunction with other resources and sound classroom teaching.