

## A Better Life for Most

### Aspiring to Middle Class Status

Praised as the 'modern Hogarth', graphic artist and caricaturist George Cruikshank produced book illustrations for Charles Dickens, notably *Oliver Twist* and *Sketches by Boz*. In 1840 he published a caricature entitled *The British Beehive* which showed English society divided by class and occupation. Aside from the aristocracy and squirearchy, a broad middle section encompassed inventors, booksellers, mechanics, weavers, jewellers, glaziers, teachers and tea dealers. Bottom layers comprised cabmen, shoe-blacks, coal heavers, sweeps, dustmen and those engaged in domestic service below stairs. Class division was accentuated with a realisation that aspiration to middle-class status, consolidating this and hopefully climbing a rung or two, meant competition throughout life.

No single definition of middle-class is adequate as there were gradations that grew clearer as the century unfolded. Some, in higher echelons, used their accumulated wealth to buy land and impressive homes whilst, on far lower rungs, earnings of a skilled working class might be on at least par with some professionals. Ambition and aspiration meant hope for a better life through hard work, thrift, self-reliance and increasingly a good education.

The rise of the Victorian middle-class is much associated with the growth of towns and cities and economic expansion. Main catalysts were a vibrant and diverse manufacturing sector and a mushrooming service sector to support it. Commerce and finance, such as banking, insurance and shipping, typified this and so did railways for freight distribution and to enable employees to get to work. Important too was the expansion of retail from local fruit and veg stores to glitzy shops in posher towns and multiplying Co-ops. All required administration by an army of professionals, from junior clerks and managers to accountancy, architecture and legal services. Added to these were services associated with the home and family, including doctors, civil servants, local government officials and teachers. All kept the economic wheels turning and quality of life too with healthcare, education, housing and sanitation to the fore.

Greater social mobility meant get up go in moving to a better job as epitomised by Samuel Smiles in his best seller, *Self Help*, published in 1859. It urged thrift, personal responsibility, application of hard work and perseverance. He interspersed these homilies, and pearls of wisdom, with inspirational case studies of those who had made it by sheer graft, intellect, ingenuity and determination. Such qualities resonated with the public, impressed by Pip in *Great Expectations*, transformed from blacksmith to gentleman, and tales too of adventurous exploits in a world of Empire.

### Distinguished by Profession

A junior clerk in a City firm might earn £100 a year, and chairman £1,000, but they shared one thing in common as members of 'the great middle class.' They wore coats, stiff white collars and top hats. One senior clerk was the fictional Charles Pooter, characterised in *Diary of a Nobody* by George and Weedon Grossmith. With only a lowly middle-class status but snobbery in abundance, Charles hoped to climb the greasy pole of a lampooned, class-ridden society. Faintly amusing but rather vulgar was one rather sniffy review. In 1851 there were 44,000 clerks, bankers and accountants but by 1901 this had increased to 119,000.

In the professions, promotion through the tiers often depended on the school you attended and who you knew. Categories evolved such as respectable and deserving. Those working

in higher professions looked down on people in trade, in a form of upstairs & downstairs. A skilled engineer might earn more than the clerk but he worked with his hands, befitting a member of a lower class.

Scores of manuals existed such as *How to Behave* and *Hints For a Gentleman* to avoid social embarrassment, by responding correctly to RSVP and social etiquette at dinner, to personal dress, manners and polite conversation. Work for a middle-class woman continued to be frowned upon, with servants expected to undertake domestic tasks of cleaning and cooking. A nursemaid would be on hand, with private tuition to augment a basic school education or, for the more wealthy, replace it entirely.

Clothes would be made in a fashionable salon for the London Season that lasted from Easter to August when Parliament rose to disperse to grouse moors, seaside retreats or abroad. Impressing a social clique meant material possessions, otherwise known as "paraphernalia of gentility." Gaudy carpets, impressive pianos and superior paintings were advertised in new women's magazines. Publisher Sam Beeton's *Englishwomen's Domestic Magazine* had a twin message of wealth and patriotism in boosting trade and promoting the Empire. Social status and etiquette meant smooth white hands and cumbersome crinoline skirts that would convey the correct impression, and an oasis of refined calm. Untainted by decadence, and absolved from the sins of greed, envy and even lust, the middle classes strove to improve their own prospects and those of their offspring.

### **Keeping up with the Jones**

In the last third of the century, middle classes eagerly awaited the next labour saving device that would not only save time but ease the fatigue of women bearing the brunt of household chores. In 1890 William Sellers of Keighley manufactured a hand-operated washing machine that worked by turning a wheel, with a separate handle for the mangle. The Bissell carpet sweeper, imported from America in 1895, lessened 'housemaid's knee,' whilst Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management*, published in 1850, became a best seller. It offered advice and handy tips from menus and budgets to how to manage your servants.

Home furnishings, fabrics and wallpapers were enriched with fashionable designs by William Morris for those with money. Venturing out, the hustle and bustle of the late Victorian period is illustrated in John O'Connor's *Pentonville Road* (1884), looking west into an orange sunset, with the imposing Gothic St Pancras for a backdrop. A similar scene of intense urban activity is captured too in William Lugsdale's, *St Pauls and Ludgate Hill* (1897). Hansom cabs jostle for space beneath a bridge whilst a train, belching smoke, passes above. A hazy view of St Paul's only adds to the scene of frenzied Victorian progress.

There was a drawback in being first to launch into the industrialised age and new markets. Machinery and equipment became obsolete far quicker, requiring huge capital investment. There was also a reliance on the tried and trusted, rather than investment in new fangled and untried contraptions with an uncertain demand. Caution, prudence, reluctance and aversion to risk went hand in glove.

The problem was that wealthy investors and financial magnates saw far quicker and greater returns in the surging economy of the United States and in the British Empire. This period heralded the birth of financial investment, divorced from direct ownership, that characterised previous British growth. The wealthy and the canny could invest anywhere in the world, the only criteria being the expected return and extent of risk. The end of the century also saw

the emergence of large industrial enterprises and mega corporations, in the USA especially, and new concepts such as division of labour, specialisation and time & motion.

### **Stemming the Tide**

The Victorians had a completely open door to foreigners and drew no distinction between economic migrant and asylum seeker until late in the Victorian century. Between 1881 and 1914 about 2.7 million Jews migrated westwards from Eastern Europe to escape persecution, poverty, conscription into military service and to seek work. The assassination of the Russian Czar in 1881 was followed by a series of pogroms against Jews in the Russian empire. Jews were forbidden from owning or settling on land outside towns or moving between villages and restrictions were placed on entering higher education and the professions.

Speaking Yiddish, and maybe a little Russian and Polish, some destined for America never made it because of the language barrier, being duped on ticketing by merchants for shipping companies, or disease. This would otherwise create a health risk for fellow passengers if the onward journey was permitted. Many settled in tight-knit communities, fiercely holding onto their proud cultural heritage. The sweatshop industry of Leeds offered jobs too. The 1891 census showed 8,000 Jews with 72% involved in tailoring and in just ten years this swelled to 14,000.

Immigration triggered a fierce debate in the UK, reminiscent of today and Brexit, fuelled by a clash of values, economic anxiety and media stoking the furnace. With the arrival of Jewish refugees, the hackles of the indigenous working-class rose at higher rents, competition for jobs, lower wages and changing inner-city neighbourhoods.

Mancherjee Bhownagree, an Indian immigrant, stood for Parliament in the constituency of Bethnal Green 1895 and won on an anti-immigration ticket. By 1901 with a swelling number of immigrants, especially Russian, Austrian, Lithuanian and Polish Jews, this was a serious political issue. Some politicians, aided by parts of the media, were quick to denounce it as a threat and an 'alien invasion.' The British Brothers' League, a forerunner of the National Front and British National Party, was founded in the East End of London in the same year.

The MP for south-west Bethnal Green, S Ford-Ridley, claimed that 90,000 'aliens' had settled in the country in the first nine months of 1901. Whilst widely travelled, his evidence was compelling, but questionable. Few could argue with his statistics as no official records were kept, other than the national census. It was claimed that many entering British ports were en-route for the USA, South Africa and other destinations. Historian V. Lipman estimates the number of Russian-Jewish immigrants who settled permanently in this country between 1881 and 1905 was about 100,000.

The 1901 Census Report noted the highest proportion of foreigners to total population was in London where it reached 30 per thousand. This masked pockets where immigration was extremely high such as Stepney at almost 40%. Parts of Spitalfields, now Whitechapel, had a 95% Jewish population in contrast today with a high proportion of Bangladeshi. Only 13 other towns or cities had a foreign population of more than 1%, including Manchester, Hull, Tynemouth, South Shields, Leeds, Grimsby, Liverpool and Swansea.

The first big influx of Chinese immigrants was in 1866. Chinese sailors arrived in Liverpool, settling near the docks in Cleveland Square. By 1871 there were over 200 Chinese living in Liverpool, compared to 582 in London in the 1891 census. Liverpool was the magnet for Irish escaping the famine, either staying, or en route to America. By the end of the famine

in 1851 some 90,000 Irish were living in Liverpool, making up a quarter of the population. As with many immigrants they were extremely vulnerable to racketeers and unsavoury types.

### **Those Left Behind**

Social and economic progress for the disadvantaged was nigh impossible and repeated from generation to generation. In 1885 the Social Democratic Foundation showed almost 25% of London's population lived in extreme poverty, whilst in Liverpool 25,000 children were not at school or work. Charles Booth, born in Liverpool and son of a corn merchant, was greatly concerned, not only in the incidence of poverty, but the causes as were his circle of friends. These included Beatrice Potter (later Webb), Octavia Hill of the Charity Organisation Society and Canon Samuel Barnett. Also concerning Booth was the poor presentation and accuracy of statistics, a complaint shared in common with Florence Nightingale. He felt statistics for London's poverty were probably embellished. From Booth's massive study emerged *The Life and Labour of the People of London* that eventually ran to 17 volumes.

The inquiry was split into the three broad sections: poverty, industry and religious, moral or social influences. Special studies examined links to poverty by type of occupation, housing, population movement & migration, education, the "unoccupied classes" and the "inmates of institutions." The staggering conclusion in his first volume was that, far from exaggerating poverty, it was in places as high as 35%. Especially revealing were underlying causes and the case for reform, including payment of old age pensions that Booth advocated.

The figures were consistent with those of Seebohm Rowntree who, in 1900 in a study of York, showed that 27.8% of the population living in poverty, of whom 9.9% lived in primary poverty. The study indicated that poverty was cyclical and that, as with Booth's findings, the poor were not to blame, other than the workshy. The revelations led Churchill to comment, "I see little glory in an Empire which can rule the waves and is unable to flush its sewers." For destitute urban dwellers and many agrarian families, a prime concern was not sanitation but eking out a living. Theirs was a hand to mouth existence, especially without a garden or an allotment.

A family living in a state of primary poverty could not afford to spend a penny on a rail fare or omnibus journey, nor indulge in entertainment. They couldn't save anything. Children had no pocket money, parents mustn't smoke or drink, nor buy any clothes for the family. Food, sustaining physical health, was "of the plainest and most economical description." The wage-earner could not afford to be absent for a single day. If any condition was broken, the only option was to reduce an already meagre diet.

### **Let Workers Unite**

The Chartist movement, led by fiery orator Fergus O'Connor, made barely a dent in trying to persuade Parliament to extend the franchise and improve working conditions. Its demise came in 1848, at the height of revolution in Europe. A mass rally was held on Kennington Common to march on Parliament to present their third petition. Troops were stationed on the approach bridges to prevent the march and the protesters dispersed.

Led by Henry Hyndman and then William Morris, the radical Social Democratic Foundation fared no better. Neither did the breakaway Socialist League. Their cause was not helped by

the 1832 Reform Act that still left 40% of men without a vote with little prospect of the vote being extended to women. Parliamentary representation was now urgent.

Although membership of trade unions grew from mid-century they were not made legal until 1871. The economic depression from 1873 to 1896 presented new challenges, especially for agriculture that could not compete with grain imports from the USA and trades involved in manufacture and export. This new unionism soon reached out to the unskilled who lacked representation. Even in a more militant north the labour societies tended to be fragmented such as in mining, railways and textiles but the tide was turning. Authorities were now more wary in trying to prevent the formation of societies and associations in the wake of protest against the treatment of the Tolpuddle Martyrs decades earlier.

Militancy now centred on London where, in 1871, five workers were sentenced to 12 months for "conspiring with threats to coerce the Beckton Gas Light and Coke Company." The crime was to present a wage claim. The five workers served five months only before release by The Home Secretary. Beckton was the scene of another industrial dispute in 1889 but the year before witnessed a strike that changed employer and worker relations forever.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1888 about 1,400 workers, mostly female, from the Bryant & May match factory in Bow, London, went on strike. They had several grievances. Wages were lower than 10 years before, fines were imposed for trivial reasons and concern was expressed about the incidence of phosphorous necrosis, otherwise known as 'phossy jaw.' Incensing workers too was the rise in share price from £5 to £18 in five years and payment of dividends of 20% to shareholders. The strike lasted two weeks, ending in victory with a wage increase, removal of fines and facility to eat meals, other than at a work-station. It took a further twenty years before white phosphorous was banned in the manufacture of matches.

One year later in 1889 the Dockworkers' Strike began. The prime grievance was pay rates for 10,000 casual labourers who reported daily. On average, only a third obtained work for the day with no guarantee of the number of hours. Matters came to a head on 12<sup>th</sup> August when Ben Tillett, the strike organiser, approached directors who point blank refused to listen to demands for an increase in wages of 1d to 6d per hour, an improvement in overtime pay and a minimum of four hours work per day. The dock strike had begun.

Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> August was the day of the Great March that started at Poplar Town Hall and ended at the Houses of Parliament. Employers tried various tactics to recruit 'scab' labour but most were detected by groups of pickets providing 24 hours watch. On 30<sup>th</sup> August the Times reported: "the trade of the greatest port in the world is paralysed." Cardinal Manning tried to intervene and, together with the Lord Mayor and other dignitaries, tried to persuade the employers to relent. Financial relief came in from all quarters, even Australia. Donations totalled £47,000. It was clear hunger alone would not force the dockers back to work. The shipping companies were worried as P&O lost £15,000 in the first two weeks of the strike.

Finally, the Lord Mayor set up a conciliation committee and on 6<sup>th</sup> September they agreed to pay 6d per hour from 1<sup>st</sup> January 1889 with a minimum of four hours work. Docker demands had been met but delaying the pay rise was a sticking point. A compromise was agreed to bring this forward to 4<sup>th</sup> November. On 14<sup>th</sup> September the dock strike ended after five weeks.

The successful strike was a fertile recruiting vehicle for Trades Union Congress membership that quickly rose from 568,000 to 1,094,000 in 1891. The next year Keir Hardie stood as an Independent for the working class constituency of West Ham South and won. On entering

the Commons he refused to wear the ritual black frock coat, silk top hat and starched wing collar, instead opting for a plain tweed suit, tie and deerstalker hat.

Events were moving fast. The fledgling Independent Labour Party was founded in Bradford in 1893, spearheaded by Keir Hardie with the assistance of Ramsey MacDonald. Twin aims were to represent the interests of working classes and achieve representation in Parliament. John Burns and Tom Mann, both influential in the dock strike, were among the first MPs elected.

## **Inventing the Future**

In a golden time of innovation in the last third of the century, the US Patent Office granted a staggering total of over half a million patents, from the Eastman camera and Singer sewing machine to Remington typewriter, flying machine of the Wright brothers and early prototype cars. The first successful bi-directional transmission of clear speech was by Bell and Watson in 1876, although others claimed to have invented a working telephone first. A vast railroad network, Morse code and mechanised McCormick reaper replacing the hand reaper, sparked a tremendous increase in production in the United States.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1879, Joseph Swan repeated an earlier experiment to the Lit & Phil Society in the lecture theatre at Newcastle, the first public room in the world to have electric light. The following year he installed light bulbs in the library of industrialist William Armstrong at Craggside, Northumberland, the first home in the world to have electric lighting. In 1881 the Savoy in London was the first theatre to be lit. Rivalry was intense. Thomas Edison filed a patent, approved on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1880, whilst that of Joseph Swan was approved exactly 10 months later. Edison craftily patented his bulb before his prototype was fully developed. Swan was first in trialling but his bulbs had a short life, unlike Edison who used a carbonized bamboo filament lasting over 1,200 hours.

The booming age of business magnates was epitomised by J. D. Rockefeller, exploiting oil and railways, and by Andrew Carnegie, turning raw pig iron into steel in the vast furnaces of Pittsburgh. Unimaginable fortunes were made. Real living standards for most Americans soared spectacularly, to the envy of Europe. Britain, consoled with the thought it would soon have its own versions of these inventions, was unable to compete with the scale of innovation, nor with the levels of productivity achieved thanks to systematic measurement and control. Britain's relative decline started slowly from about 1870 and, by the time of Queen Victoria's death in 1901, had gathered momentum.

In 1870 productivity in Great Britain, as measured by output per worker, was about the same as the USA with Germany lagging by about 25%. In a little over 40 years, to the outbreak of World War 1, productivity in Great Britain more than doubled but it increased more than five times in the USA and over three times in Germany. The unpalatable fact was, although the economy of Great Britain still showed impressive annual growth, the relative rate lagged the United States and Germany, their prime competitors.

The signs were ominous. A graph projecting trends showed that it would not be long before Britain was overtaken in growth and performance, and thereafter would trail. Not only that, the gap would widen further.