

# Why the worst year was 1978

## Mass strikes and the Winter of Discontent led to misery

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IT brought a winter of strikes and discontent, so perhaps it's no wonder that 1978 has been deemed the gloomiest year in two centuries.

And yet, it wasn't all bad. The nation was not at war and nor was it in the grip of cholera or any other epidemic. The average house cost just £17,000 and beer was less than 30p a pint.

The year earned its dubious accolade after millions of books and articles were analysed.

The same study has pronounced 1880 – when the British Empire was at its peak – as the high point of happiness, despite the fact that millions were living and working in squalor. The report measured the emotional content of texts over the years since 1820

to assess overall mood.

Study author Professor Daniel Sgroi of [Warwick University](#), said: 'After the end of rationing in the 1950s national happiness was very high as were expectations. But things did not pan out as people might have hoped and national happiness fell for many years until the low-point of the Winter of Discontent.'

The national mood was lower than in the First and Second World Wars, though it did begin to improve after the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Co-author Professor Thomas Hills added: 'The UK seems happiest around 1880. People that were writing then would have probably been rich and educated, and life might have been like a basket of cherries for those people.'

'It's the age of empire for Britain, it's very proud of itself.'

The year 1880 saw the first test match between England and

Australia, Disraeli was elected prime minister for the second time and the first frozen lamb was imported from Australia.

The researchers arrived at their conclusions by assigning a rating to thousands of common words on a scale from highly positive to highly negative. They then analysed texts in the Google Books corpus – more than eight million books.

The research, published in the journal *Nature Human Behaviour*, assessed positive and negative language in the UK, US, Italy and Germany from 1820 to 2009. Professor Hills added: 'Our national happiness is like an adjustable spanner that we open and close to calibrate our experiences against our recent past, with little lasting memory for the triumphs and tragedies of our age.'

The research was carried out at [Warwick University](#) of Glas-



gow Adam Smith Business School and The Alan Turing Institute in London.

## Age of strife... and Blondie

■ The Winter of Discontent in 1978 and 1979 was the biggest stoppage of labour since the 1926 General Strike.

■ The strikes led to bin bags piled up in Leicester Square and bodies going unburied in Liverpool.

■ England failed to qualify for the 1978 World

Cup. Ipswich Town beat Arsenal 1-0 in the FA Cup.

■ Grease was top of the movie box office. A song from it, You're the One That I Want, spent nine weeks at number one.

■ Blondie released the album Parallel Lines.

■ The average salary was £3,269.



Blondie's third album



**Bags of trouble: Rubbish lies in Leicester Square after wave of strikes at end of 1978**