

Do you remember 1978? As I recall, it was a pretty good year

It was supposedly the unhappiest time ever in the UK – but Mick Brown begs to differ...

What was the worst year of your life? Psychology researchers from Warwick University have decided, after intensive research (a euphemism for searching online), that people in Britain were at their most unhappy in 1978 – more so than during the First and Second World Wars.

By accessing the millions of newspaper stories, novels and memoirs available through Google Books, dating back to 1825, and keying in words signifying happiness and sadness, the study found that people in the UK appeared to be at their unhappiest during the year best (or should that be worst?) remembered for the Winter of Discontent.

Ah, yes, I remember it well. Fuel shortages caused by the lorry drivers' strike; picket lines outside hospitals; bakeries imposing bread rationing after a bakers' strike led to panic buying. Soon, Leicester Square would be turned into a rat-infested garbage dump, and Britain would see its biggest individual day of strike action since the General Strike of 1926.

Well, I remember it vaguely. As the years pass, crises, of whatever kind, tend to take on an almost nostalgic glow. Oh, yes, terrible it was, but we battled through, you've never had it so good, and so on. But if history gives us one version of an era or a year, personal experience gives us quite another.

In 1978, we had bought our first, very modest home in a south London suburb, in a road in which everyone knew everyone else, a melting pot of classes and races, where evenings were spent in a neighbour's garden with what seemed like the whole street playing bulldog, and on Guy Fawkes night gathering around the largest bonfire I'd seen before or since.

While history records London's

streets being full of rubbish, I have a more vivid memory of John Travolta's arrogant strut down a street in faraway Brooklyn in his red dancing shoes, paint pot in hand, to the strains of the Bee Gees's *Stayin' Alive*. If you liked disco – and I had a weakness for it – 1978 was the year *Saturday Night Fever* hit British screens, with a life-enhancing soundtrack that featured

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the greatest disco track ever recorded, *Disco Inferno* by The Trammps.

And 1978 had other landmark musical moments, not least the first startling appearance on *Top of the Pops* of Kate Bush warbling *Wuthering Heights*, and the glacial, Monroe-esque Debbie Harry singing the first Blondie hit, *Denis*, without appearing to move her lips. In cinema, it was the year

Strikes, struts and surrealism: 1978 saw the Winter of Discontent, John Travolta's *Saturday Night Fever* and Kate Bush's *Wuthering Heights*

of *The Deer Hunter*; Martin Scorsese's epic musical adieu to the Seventies, *The Last Waltz*, featuring Bob Dylan, the Band and Van Morrison; and Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Like any year, 1978 produced its share of the tragic, the surreal and the groundbreaking. In Guyana, the cult leader Jim Jones commanded 900 men, women and children belonging to members of his "Peoples Temple" to die by suicide. In Hastings, Britain's first official naturist beach opened at Covehurst Bay, while an American army sergeant Walter Robinson "walked" across the English Channel in 11 hours 30 minutes, using homemade water shoes.

In a week in which racism has reared its ugly head in football, it is worth noting that Viv Anderson, a defender for Nottingham Forest, became the first black player to pull on an England shirt, in a 1-0 friendly win over Czechoslovakia at Wembley Stadium.

It was the year Larry Grayson took over from Bruce Forsyth as presenter of *The Generation Game*, of Dennis Potter's trailblazing television drama *Pennies From Heaven*, and *Top Gear* beginning its mighty run on BBC Two. It was also the year the BBC came off air for 24 hours after a strike. In order to maintain its Christmas schedules, a deal was reached, giving the unions a 15 per cent pay rise.

It was also the year that the first "test tube baby", Louise Brown, was born after conception by in vitro fertilisation. Which leads me to the reason that, far from being the worst year of my life, 1978 was one of the very best. It was when our first child was born.

The memory of strikes and strife quickly fades in the memory of seeing her for the first time, and returning home that evening, through the litter-strewn streets, on Cloud Nine, and dancing alone and ecstatically happy to Stevie Wonder's *Isn't She Lovely*. And she still is.



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