

# The good old days: Britons at their happiest after world wars

## SOCIETY

By Cahal Milmo

Britons were at their happiest following the end of the two world wars, a study suggesting there may be some truth in the notion of the “good old days” has found.

Pioneering research based on an analysis of language used in millions of books and newspaper articles dating back to 1820 suggests that well-being is remarkably resilient in wartime – and economic booms and busts have only a modest effect on happiness.

After a happiness peak in the late 1940s there was a distinct decline in sunny dispositions over the next 25 years, culminating in a nadir during the suitably named Winter of Discontent of 1978-79.

Britons reached a 200-year low in their sense of happiness during the 1970s with a loss of well-being significantly below even that recorded in both world wars, the study suggests.

The collaboration between three academic bodies aims to fill the data gap between the more distant past and ongoing contemporary studies such as the United Nations World Happiness Index, dating from 2011.

The researchers, from the universities of Warwick and Glasgow alongside the Alan Turing Institute which specialises in data science, said the result was an “accurate guide to the national mood”, possibly because editors over the past two centuries tended to publish material aligning

with the mood of their readers.

After the dark days of the 1970s, the data suggests there was then a slow recovery followed by a sharp increase in happiness from the turn

of the millennium until the cut-off point for the study on the eve of the financial crisis.

The results suggest that while both world wars resulted in dips in Britons’ sense of well-being, the low-point of neither war came close to the peacetime sense of unhappiness felt in the 1970s.

In America, happiness reached its peak in the 1920s before being sent plunging by the Great Depression and the outbreak of the Second World War. It recovered in the 1950s and 1960s, before the civil rights struggle and outbreak of the Vietnam War sent it plunging again.

Professor Thomas Hills, of Warwick University, said: “What’s remarkable is that national subjective well-being is incredibly resilient to wars. Even temporary economic booms and busts have little long-term effect.”

The study also appears to suggest that Victorian Britons were dramatically happier than their 20th-century successors with well-being levels comparable to the peaks of the “Roaring Twenties”. But the researchers said accurate comparisons over long periods of time were difficult due to changes in literary style

and the backgrounds of authors.

### Health and wealth When were we happiest?

■ The study suggests that gains in health have been just as important in achieving happiness as spurts in economic growth. An increase of 12 months in life expectancy had the same effect on happiness as a 4.3 per cent increase in GDP.

■ Britons were at their happiest during the ‘Roaring Twenties’ and immediately following the end of the Second World War.

■ The worst period for national happiness in Britain was the post-war era, reaching a nadir in the 1978-79 Winter of Discontent, when the UK had a series of strikes that led to power blackouts, rubbish left piled in the street and bodies unburied.

■ Happiness levels did not reach the highs of the inter-war years until the Nineties. There was also a rapid increase in well-being between 2000 and 2009, in the lead-up to the global financial crisis.

■ In post-war America, the lowest point of the index coincides with the Vietnam War and the evacuation of Saigon in 1975.



■ The researchers hope information on each nation's happiness level may help governments to make better policy decisions.



**{i}** The researchers crunch data from sources i UK, America, Germany and Italy to track the frequency of words used to **derive a "happiness value"** for the period when they were written.

