

# 1957:

## Happiest year of the 20th century

A study makes that claim even though most homes had no washing machine, fridge or central heating

By **Dominic Midgley**

**H**AROLD MACMILLAN has long been ridiculed by historians for telling the country in 1957 that, "Most of our people have never had it so good." But the man who governed Britain as prime minister from 1957 to 1963 has now been vindicated by a study that concludes that it was indeed the happiest year of the last century.

Academics at the University of Warwick used pioneering linguistic computing to read millions of books published since the 18th century to identify the frequency of words associated with positive emotions such as "enjoyment" and "happiness" and negative ones like "stress" and "unhappy".

It found that the national mood was never more buoyant than in 1957 despite a shortage of appliances we now take for granted.

Only one in five households then had a washing machine, one in 20 possessed a refrigerator and central heating barely existed. Freezing outdoor toilets were also common in many houses.

But the war was over, rationing had ended and people were counting their blessings. Elvis Presley was on the radio, the space race was getting under way, wages were up and unemployment was down.

"There was a genuine feeling that Britain was going to be great again," says Dr Daniel Sgroi, associate professor of economics and co-author of the report, which was published in conjunction with the Social Market Foundation.

Here we present some reasons to be cheerful, 1950s style.

### **THE ECONOMY**

Britain was living through a period of full employment in the sense that the unemployment rate of 1.6

per cent was so low that it was considered irreducible by economists on the grounds that it consists of little more than people between jobs and others unable to work because of disability.

Meanwhile increased production in major industries such as steel, coal and cars had led to a rise in wages, export earnings and investment.

### **TELEVISION**

The 19.5 million people who made up the adult television audience in 1957 spent on average nearly 40 per cent of each evening watching the box. The roots of our genesis into a nation of couch potatoes had been boosted by the Queen's coronation four years earlier. In March 1953 figures for the total of combined sound and television licences were given as 2,142,452, compared with 1,457,000 a year previously.

The Coronation broadcast lasted

for seven hours and, taking into account large-screen presentations in cinemas, church halls, hospitals and other public venues, it was estimated that no fewer than 20 million people watched the service in the UK alone.

By then the BBC had enjoyed a monopoly for 17 years but when commercial television was introduced in 1955 with the launch of Associated Rediffusion in London (weekdays) and ATV (weekends) that monopoly was broken. These stations were quickly followed by regional commercial services and by March 1957 those who had a choice of programming spent just one-third of the time devoted to BBC programmes and two-thirds to ITV's output.

Meanwhile, children entertained themselves in far more traditional ways than they do today - yo-yos and I-Spy books were the most popular gifts.

## POP MUSIC

Diana by the old-school Canadian crooner Paul Anka was the best-selling single of 1957 but a feel-good rock 'n' roll revolution was

well under way. Elvis Presley had already had number ones with Heartbreak Hotel and Hound Dog and his hits were regularly played on what was then called the Light Programme (now Radio 2).

He had even earned enough to splash out \$100,000 (£80,000) on a mansion he called Graceland on a 14-acre estate in Memphis, Tennessee.

Meanwhile, the Cavern Club opened in Liverpool in the same year that Paul McCartney and John Lennon first met as teenagers at a garden fete at St Peter's Church, Woolton, Liverpool.

## THE SPACE RACE

The Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1, the first satellite to orbit the Earth, and in doing so kicked off the space race.

It was a modest beginning as Sputnik was only the size of a beach ball but two months later the US showed just how tricky this game could be.

Its first attempt to launch a satellite failed when its Vanguard rocket blew up on the launch pad. It eventually ended up on top by putting the first men on the moon with Apollo 11 in 1969.

## MOVIES

With television still in its infancy cinema was a major attraction. Figures from the Film Distributors' Association reveal that there were 915 million visits to UK cinemas in 1957 compared to 172 million in 2012.

Around The World In 80 Days, starring David Niven and Shirley MacLaine, was the big hit of the year winning five Oscars including the award for best film.

The Bridge On The River Kwai, released towards the end of the year, outstripped this feat in 1958 when it was awarded seven Oscars including best film.

## FOOD AND DRINK

After years of being exhorted by characters such as Potato Pete and Dr Carrot to make do with vegetarian meals, people were still getting used to the mouth-watering novelty of eating meat whenever they could afford it.

Rationing had come to an end three years earlier after restrictions on the sale of meat and bacon were cancelled after 14 years.

## HOUSE PRICES

Property booms may be part and parcel of contemporary life but in the 1950s the housing market was much more stable... and cheap. The average weekly wage was £7.50 - adding up to annual earnings of £390 - and, at £2,000, the average house price was just under five times this figure.

Today houses are twice as expensive. The average salary stands at £26,500 while the average house price is £256,000.

## RETREAT FROM EMPIRE

Britain began to shed its colonies with Ghana becoming the first black African nation to gain its independence in March 1957.

## CARS

Models such as the Morris Minor - which became the first British car to sell a million two years later - and the Standard Vanguard were kings of the road when traffic was much less of a problem.

Sixty years ago there were only four million cars on the roads compared to 37 million today. That said, they had fewer miles of road. For example, the 107-mile M62 was

signed off in 1957 but did not fully open until the early 1970s.

## THE JET AGE

Boeing's launch of the 707 ushered in the era of air travel for the masses. It was the forerunner of a range of models including the 747, which took its maiden flight in 1970.



**TRENDS:** clockwise from left; the USSR's Sputnik satellite, yo-yos, Around The World In 80 Days and rock 'n' roller Elvis Presley



**TV TIMES:** Families spent a third of their viewing hours watching the BBC and the remainder tuned in to ITV