

That was the year that was... the happiest of the century?

1957 has been hailed the
happiest year of the
20th century.

Sharon Griffiths
looks at life then
and now



So 1957 was the year we were happiest, say researchers at the University of Warwick. The very year, in fact, when prime minister Harold MacMillan was telling us “You’ve never had it so good.”

The news unleashed a torrent of rose-tinted memories in newspapers and online. We’ll ignore the racist stuff but the nicer comments generally featured stories of full employment, stay-at-home mums, and children being allowed to roam freely for days on end and being deliriously happy at getting no more than bread and jam for tea and an orange and a doll/train for Christmas. Ah, happy days.

Fair enough. Distance lends enchantment and all that. But let’s peer our way through the clouds of nostalgia and think about...

- Children’s homes where hundreds of children were abused.
- No heart transplants, new knees, hips or effective drugs for cancer.
- Six-day working weeks and just two weeks holiday if you were lucky.
- Many houses without indoor plumbing. Smelly people.
- Ice inside bedroom windows. Chilblains.
- Few students going to university and very few of them girls.

■ Lower wages for women and not much chance for careers, especially once they were married.

■ Backstreet abortions.

■ Few washing machines, fridges or even electricity in many homes.

■ Very little in the way of Health and Safety, hard hats, hi-vis, or compensation.

■ Or even warm, lightweight, waterproof clothing.

■ No understanding of the mentally ill, or “loonies” as they were known.

■ A class system in which you were still expected to know your place.

■ Especially if you were black or Irish.

■ Scratchy clothes.

■ The cane.

■ Blotchy marks on your legs from huddling too close to the fire trying to keep warm.

■ Bad teeth and impetigo.

■ Rubbish cheese, sausages and ice cream.

■ Chamber pots.

The one really great thing about 1957 – apart from Dav-e-y, Davy Crockett – was the terrific feeling of optimism. There was a feeling that things were getting better; that the future really was going to be good. Well, there was certainly plenty of room for improvement...



This group of people from our archives in this 1957 photograph were clearly having plenty of fun. But for others....