

We've never had it so good: 1957 was the happiest year

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Few men lived beyond the age of 70, central heating was unaffordable and many homes still had an outside privy, but 1957 was the happiest year in recent British history, according to a study of the past 230 years. Appropriately, it was the year when Harold Macmillan, the prime minister, declared: "Our people have never had it so good."

The University of Warwick made the conclusion after analysing billions of words in books and articles written since 1776. The analysis, published with the help of the Social Market Foundation, ranked positive words such as "peaceful", "enjoyment" and "happiness" alongside negative words such as "stress" and "unhappy".

It found that happiness levels rose after 1945 and peaked in 1957 before declining during the 1960s and 1970s until a nadir in 1978's Winter of Discontent. There was then a recovery but never to the levels of the 1950s.

Daniel Sgroi, co-author of the report,

said what came before was key to understanding why people felt so fortunate in that year.

"In 1957 memories of the Second World War and the period of austerity that followed were still fresh in the mind of the nation, perhaps helping people to appreciate what they had," he said. "It may be that people in the 1950s had a greater sense of realism about happiness."

Rationing had ended three years previously and the modern age was making its presence felt with the start of the space race and the release of Elvis Presley's *Jailhouse Rock*. However, medical treatment was still relatively basic. The average life expectancy for men was 66 and for women 71.

"While there is much more individualism now, in the 1950s people were more likely to feel they had a common goal, so could for example leave their door open when they went out because they trusted their neighbours," Dr Sgroi added. "Now we are more aware of what is happening in the world, but this could be making us unhappier."