

British Social Changes

COURTING: MARRIAGE: CHILDREN: DIVORCE:

1910-2010

Setting the Scene

All animals have a home, not just any old place, but a particular spot, which is familiar and well known, where the animal feels safe and can have its young... The nest or den is a refuge from attack – somewhere to lie up, and rest. Humans are equally drawn to such a place which they defend cherish and consider their own. This place is called home; it is cared for, protected and maintained. As with all human behaviour some people are particularly drawn to their home - their space, and busy themselves cleaning it, working in it; feeling most happy and relaxed when at home..., safe from the maddening world outside. In British society, prior to the First World War, 'a women's place was in the home'. This was expected and applied to all females, whatever their age, whether married or unmarried... This also applied to the handicapped, the old and infirm. Those women who could find domestic labour – as a servant - in another person's home, did so. This was done to relieve the financial burden of the parents. The 'home' was not just associated with, 'where one laid one's head'; or keeping safe or lowering the drawbridge to keep out the enemy, but with raising a family, feeding it and nurturing the young. The birth-rate in 1876 was 36 per thousand. This figure declined in the next fifty years to 15. The death-rate in the thirties was just eleven per thousand per year. It was very noticeable between the wars that these figures were very different from the turn of the century. Just before the Second World War nearly half of the population was aged between fifteen and forty-five. There was a worry then, as now - seventy years later, that there is a shortage of workers to support the elderly – as the death-rate declines. The relevance of marriage is being challenged by the consumer society and women's liberation. Men have lost their power and gained a competitive partner... now we will see 'who's worth it!'

The population in 1900 was around thirty-eight million when around five million women worked. A century later the population was nearly sixty million of who thirteen million were working women.

In Edwardian times, single men and women were introduced to each other - for them to become acquaintances. For this friendship to be carried further, it was normal behaviour for them to be introduced to each other's parents... The most important consideration for the parents - if the friendship was a serious attempt by the suitor - to advance his desire, was for the parents to be assured he could maintain their daughter – at least at the same social level. This courting etiquette continued up to WW1. Thereafter, working class young people took it upon themselves to decide for themselves. The middle and upper classes continued the previous courting behaviour. By the 1920s when land, farms, estates, and large houses were split up and sold off. This form of social courtship gradually died out, even for the aristocracy.

There have been over the years changes in the vows the couple make to each other when getting married. However, all religious and secular ceremonies uphold certain declarations. The main one being that they both promise to love each other forever... a Christian view would be that Christ died to save us all which is the greatest form of love. I am equally sure that all religions and civil authorities would be based on a similar promise. From a social point of view this creates stability... instills discipline, helps maintain cultural moral standards.

Life expectancy at the time of The Great Exhibition was just over forty years of age... this had increased by ten years by 1900... a further fifty years saw the increase to eighty. The average number of children in any one family in the second half of the twentieth century was two. The most significant factor for this reduction is the age of the mother, which has risen to twenty-nine...

Until 1857 divorce was allowed only by private Act of Parliament. By 1872, is recorded there were about two hundred divorces granted annually. Nearly one hundred and fifty years later the trend has been upwards, to about 180,000 per annum... about 70% were first marriages affecting couples aged about forty years... granted to women for unreasonable behaviour, to the man, two years separation with consent. The reasons given for this continuing trend include: marrying at a young age, having pre-marital sex, and previous divorce. These depressing figures are pretty general - throughout the western world and English speaking countries.

The British society is solidly behind a heterosexual monogamous marriage, accepting sex before marriage. Living with one's partner is a growing trend, previously called 'a trial marriage' now increasingly referred to as 'cohabiting'. Sexual behaviour, procreation and family life now part of the school's curriculum, and within the syllabus, a reference to homosexuality.