

Chapter 1

Outer Northwest London, 1929 – 1939.

GREAT DEPRESSION: BRITAIN'S POSITION - Wage Reductions – General Strike – Gold Standard – Parity of the Pound – Economic Crisis – Public Spending – National Government – Unemployment – Unaffected Areas – Population Explosion – Housing for the Many – New Towns.

From many sources it has been declared, 'a time of depression' - coming from a lowering of workers wages. This industrial slump, or sharp decline, had, as its source, The First World War. Britain lost its position as the worlds leading economy in the late thirties - just before that war. The depression was all that was needed to cast Britain down... to finally lose out to the other main European economies - in the 1970s.

In May 1929, a General Election gave Labour 287 seats, while the Conservatives had 260. Baldwin resigned, and MacDonald took office again. This government needed the support of the Liberals, for on its own had the effect of limiting radical thinking. Later that year, the Stock Market Crash in New York, was the beginning of The American Depression which had a knock-on effect to Britain. The main effect was felt in the north where most of Britain's heavy industry is located. The opposition parties demanded further cuts including the public sector workers wages, putting a brake on government projects. What further hurt the poor was a cut ordered in the payment of unemployment benefits. MacDonald appointed four Ministers – Thomas, Lansbury, Johnston, and Mosley. This special body of politicians had the specific task to deal with the problem of unemployment.

WAGE REDUCTIONS: GENERAL STRIKE.

The period from the General Strike in 1926, when the union leaders fully appreciated the political implications of their industrial action wouldn't lead anywhere, till today, has seen the integration of the unions into all processes of government. State assistance to particular industries integrated the Government into both what the managements and unions wanted. This was necessary with the beginnings of rearmament and ultimately war. The General Strike set the march of the unions back losing half a million members from the congress.

The Government feared complete industrial and social dislocation, which seemed inevitable. There were thousands of trained officers and men in civilian life and a sufficiency of army transport. The Territorial Army was a considerable force. My father was involved by his position as a senior sergeant and as a manager of one of the railway company's freight distributors to organize a civilian response. Plans were made to stock food and petrol. Reliable men drove Underground trains, buses and used their private cars as taxis. The trade unions had been given convincing proof that this was going on, and that the rest of the country was not prepared to see chaos. Arrangements were made for the Territorial Army to act as Auxiliary Police, and even be paid a subsidiary allowance. They had little to do for the strike soon over. However, the trades union were left in no doubt of the effective use which could be made of the Territorial Force.

GOLD STANDARD, PARITY OF THE POUND.

After the war the troops returned home – most to return to their previous jobs. As they did so, the women who had been doing some of those jobs were dispensed with – pushing them aside to find work in domestic service, the retail trade, and the clothing industry. Britain had to change

from war production to peacetime using worn out machine tools and inappropriate production lines. It was an impossible task; there was no chance of amassing sufficient capital - from a depleted order book, to reach a pre-war investment position. The government was advised by The Bank of England to make the pound the same value as the pre-war dollar, nearly five dollars to the pound – convertible to its value in gold. The result made British exports more expensive, reduced demand, cut productivity and naturally, increased unemployment. The country already had a large number of unemployed; employers knew they could replace discontented workers, they also knew they could lower the price of their goods if they reduced wages... which they did! The workers were already paid very little objected to a further reduction. The Trades Union Council called for a General Strike, to support the miners who were already on strike against wage cuts and longer hours, May 1926. Although it was called a general strike it was only for key workers: in transport, iron and steel, building, printing and electricity. Naturally enough this had the effect of shutting down most union controlled businesses for want of power. Even though the strike was over quickly the effects of this, on top of returning the pound to the Gold Standard was that the country stayed in recession...

My father, managing the distribution and collection of freight, from Paddington main line station, organized his managers, office workers, and sympathetic university students to carry on moving the freight. When possible he loaded and drove a team of horses, in company with others, all through the strike period. The Transport and General Workers Union's finances were in a dire straight. Not only was the union losing members but those that were members were not paying their membership fees.

There were no factories in North Harrow and other dormitory towns, any large offices, or distribution centres. Most of the men, and the few women, who were working, were white collar workers. The majority of outer London citizens voted Conservative, who was in office – This was the time of Baldwin's Second Ministry. Two years later, in 1928, women achieved the vote – were enfranchised, at the age of twenty-one.

ECONOMIC CRISIS

The General Election in May 1929, brought Ramsey MacDonald, and the Labour Party, into office. Their main programme was to sort out the unemployment problems – to return the nation to work. Their majority was small. MacDonald called on the Liberals to help. They were influenced by the economist thinking of Keynes who advised a massive programme of public works inline with the thinking of the Labour minister Oswald Moseley and party back benchers. This solution was eminently sensible but was rejected by the cabinet. Sixteen weeks later the Stock Market Crash occurred in New York which, coming on top of Britain's already critical industrial scene, was immediate and devastating. It is unnecessary to describe how the government and the nation considered this event. By 1930 there were two and a half million unemployed. It did not stop there! In Germany the banking system collapsed. There was a run on the pound. The cabinet would not agree to cuts in spending or in reducing the unemployment benefit.

PUBLIC SPENDING

When looking at Government Figures of central government spending, to give some sort of overview indicating hard times, and times of plenty, the conclusions can only be an approximation. However, what figures one can research do give an expected graph – the national debt in 1920 was gradually reduced, to rise to the same point twenty-four years later –showing a uniform curve. Thereafter, the rise maintained.

What we are interested in are the figures for the end of our period and what they were preparing us for. Over the thirties the government department showing the greatest rise is Social Services. This includes health, welfare and education. That department drops back to allow Military Defence to outstrip all others, peaking out in 1943/4. The drop continues... an expected result.

NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

Arguments in the Labour party, including some ministers, split the government. Stock market investors took fright withdrawing their money... destabilizing the economy. The upset, caused by the social welfare cuts, broke up the government. Instead of resigning MacDonald accepted a commission from the King to form a so-called 'National' Government, dominated by Tories – particularly by, the Tory Chancellor of the Exchequer, Neville Chamberlain. The Labour party objected to this coalition, abandoning MacDonald and his supporters. The weak political strength of the government contributed towards the call for a General Election... the result was a landslide victory for the Tories. The National Party continued in power, still lead by MacDonald, whose efforts - put into restoring national confidence in the government and nation, came to naught... The Liberals withdrew support. The Government started to inject some effort into rearmament which caused a split in the Government ranks. The Party was prepared to provide greater rearmament but only if they had support from the League of Nations. The crisis came over sanctions against Mussolini for invading Abyssinia. Lansbury resigned and Attlee elected Leader of the Labour Party, in his place.

UNEMPLOYMENT

At the start of this period, just before 1930, the country's unemployment figures rose to one and a quarter million. This figure gradually increased adding a further million; a year later, the figure rose to almost a million a year after that. 1933 was unemployment's peak, when there were four men for every three jobs. Forty per cent of the unemployed were to be found in coal-mining, iron and steel, shipbuilding, and textiles. After that peak, there was a decline until the 1930. After that, the figures climbed back - to those of the peak, six years later. All these industries were mainly found in the North, Wales and Scotland. The South of England, and in the southeast - particularly southern city and town suburbs, fared considerably better. Chamberlain forced down interest rates which kicked off the house-building boom. Great Britain started to emerge from the Great Depression...

The budget of 1931 instituted a new round of cuts in public spending and wages, including the pay of the Navy. There was a Mutiny, which created renewed pressure on the pound. The Government abandoned the gold standard. That had an immediate effect of easing pressure – it was a practical decision - allowing exports to compete with prices abroad - lead the way to an eventual recovery... Gradually employment picked up. Britain was again competitive.

UNAFFECTED AREAS

It is clear that some parts of the country and some sections of society were not unduly affected. For instance, Middlesex, and particularly Harrow, felt little from the effects of the depression. The construction of new towns, house building and the production of necessary materials and components... stimulated by the low interest rates. The production of furniture, soft furnishings, kitchen and household equipment continued to flourish. There was a demand for new electrical gadgets and communication equipment. The production of cars and lorries reached an all time high as did the need for the latest farming equipment. The Government nationalized London

Transport creating the London Passenger Transport Board to control buses and trains. This was not the only measure to influence the upturn; the Government started the Marketing Boards which guaranteed farm prices. Later that year, MacDonald resigned, replaced by Baldwin. The governments of both Baldwin [1935-7 and Chamberlain [1937 - 40] were in reality conservative administrations. It is recorded, in a number of books, that the early period [1931-1935] was in fact a coalition. There were many, from all parties, who did not want such an alliance. It was the party leaders who formed a National Government, for this is what it was.

The technical advances in transport and communication continued to be advanced by consumer demand and factory mass production methods... These mechanical innovations were slowly adopted by the armed services which tried to keep pace with the call for expansion. This rise in demand was slow to start with, but continued throughout the period, pushing forward with increasing urgency.

POPULATION EXPLOSION

The 1921 – 1931 censuses show a population increase of eleven per cent for Greater London. Beyond London in the outer northwest suburbs the increase was even greater – in Harrow it was fifty per cent. It was estimated that during 1919 – 1928 twelve thousand homes had been built within half a mile of the railway track, and that a further seventeen thousand planned.

In 1929 a large house development was started in Rayners Lane called Harrow Garden Village. The development included all the services, population amenities, re-built railway station and Odeon, art-deco cinema. All the property developed during 1929 – 1936 was substantial, using good materials, not scrimping with meagre wood mouldings and sub-standard doors. The designs are still good today, giving space and amenity to a family of five. The lower middle-class were increasingly to be found in the cities and towns suburbs, during the summer months, clipping hedge, mowing the grass verge, reading the newspaper over a cup of tea and perambulating in the park - listen to the band or watch cricket. In the winter, the population listened to the Light Programme, read Coward, Sayers, Christie, Johns and Blyton.

My mother left the Small & Tidmas lace mill in South Chard, to work for Mrs Roper the owner of Forde Abbey – as a Lady's Maid. In the first year, Mrs Roper travelled to London – which was an annual event. During the time spent in London, Mrs Roper attended the Kensington Masonic Lodge, Ladies-Night Dinner. Mrs Roper, an honoured guest, was accompanied, as a companion, by my mother.

As a Masonic Lodge official, my father and other Lodge senior members, including their guests, sat at the top table. During the evening my father invited my mother to dance... Within the year my father and mother were married at Tatworth Church, in the village my mother was born. The wedding was celebrated at my mother's previous home in Perry Street.

My parents went to live in a rented house in Sudbury, a suburb of Wembley, not far away from Harrow-on-the-Hill. A year later my brother was born. Contemplating an increase in the family, and needing a larger garden they moved to North Harrow in 1935, the same year I was born. The house had only just been built, they being the first occupants. It was the same year King George V and Queen Mary celebrated their Silver Jubilee.

My father's philosophy of property ownership was clear; he believed that given the choice he would prefer to rent than to buy. Now, it was never made clear to us children why he thought that. He obviously saw no merit in passing property on to his children, or using property as insurance – as a means of retirement collateral. Perhaps his experience of the horrors of The First World War convinced him that life was too transient – that it was best to live for the moment. Whatever, the

reason he was wrong and what happened to him and to my mother is proof that his thinking was in error – they both lived long enough to regret not being independent.

The Garden Suburb of North Harrow was grandly advertised as ‘The suburb in the country’, and was fast filling up. By the time my parents occupied number thirty-one Cumberland Road, the town had been completed. The new family had a new house in a new town, with which to celebrate their union. It became a happy home for me, a town that I spent over forty years in, having my own family, enjoying all the things that had first tempted my father to move there.