

ENGLISH/HEREFORDSHIRE SOCIETY

Herefordshire, like the rest of Britain in the first decade of the 20th century was basking in the relative comfort and confidence of a post Victorian age of empire. Britain had influence throughout the world, it had done what was right and brought order, civilisation and religion to vast parts of the world and could justly feel content. Along the way this empire building had brought great wealth to the Motherland and with emerging technology great changes to society were taking place.



Herefordshire was remote in Britain, but not isolated; firstly the canals and the railways in the late 19th Century had opened up the country, including Herefordshire. The railways had enabled the produce of the country to be easily transported to the cities and there was an era of relative rural prosperity. The Victorian ethos of organisation and corporate philanthropy had had a huge impact in respect of organised local councils, health boards, hospitals, schools and public health and utility projects to name a few.



Of Herefordshire's population of about 115,000 some 50% of this was located in its one city – Hereford and the principle market towns of Ledbury, Leominster, Ross, Bromyard and Kington, and the remainder in small villages and isolated hamlets generally tied in to agricultural or land based activities. The county had its large households and estates and the owners generally looked over their employees with a benevolent, but not overly generous eye. Most employments were land based (agriculture, wood, quarrying etc) or in support of those which carried this out (agricultural engineers, merchants and contractors, hauliers etc) and the County's main products were: beef, hops, fruit and sheep. Vast numbers of individuals were in direct and greater 'domestic service' as maids and butlers, footmen and gardeners.

There was a degree of contentment and acceptance of the social structure with loyalty 'up' and an almost paternal overwatch 'down'. Many working class individuals aimed for the stability and status of employment with a 'respectable' organisation such as the General Post Office or 'The Railway'. Workings hours were long, generally 6 days a week and no paid holidays - in this time before the widespread employment of mechanical transport, the employment of horses was universal and with livestock farming, many workers worked 7 days a week to care for the animals. Many agricultural workers had 'tied' accommodation which could easily be lost if they failed in their work.



Life was still hard for the majority of people, health had improved with education, hospitals and better sanitation, but there was still superstition and isolation in many parts of the County. Families often numbered 8 or more children and infant mortality was in the region of 14%; hard physical work, poor health and safety controls and poor diet meant that only 37% of the population lived past 60 with an average life expectancy for males early 50s and mid 50s for females. Diet and general physique were poor, epidemics (measles, mumps, chicken pox etc) and tuberculosis were common exacerbated by often over crowded and poor living conditions; the average expanded chest size for adult males was 36 inches. An agricultural worker's weekly wage was 15/- (75p) equal to 180 pennies (d); a pint of milk was 2d as was a pint of beer. A pair of work boots about 12/6 (150d) and a third class return ticket to London by train 8/6 (102d)

This balance was being influenced by better education, awareness and expectation, technological developments, cultural changes including the female emancipation campaign, overseas influences, immigration, intrigue and conspiracy contributing to a degree of xenophobia. There was a realisation that perhaps the status quo should/could not be maintained, there were anti-establishment agitators and the stifling impact of the inflexible class structure - for the first time there was a viable alternative and many individuals left the County for a 'better life' in Australia, Canada, South Africa, America or elsewhere abroad, many others became 'politically aware' and this was the high water point for Trade Unions and saw the establishment of the Labour movement.



Thus in 1914, by natural process of evolution a relatively stable period of society was drawing to a close; the patriotism and passion for 'Britannia' was still there as evidenced in the early months of World War One, but the war also acted as a catalyst to accelerate this evolutionary process.



Barrs Court station with workers 1910.

