
Opening Extract from...

The Thirties

An Intimate History

Written by Juliet Gardiner

Published by HarperPress

JULIET GARDINER

The Thirties

An Intimate History

HarperPress
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.com

Published by HarperPress in 2010

1

A catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 00 724076 0

Set in Minion by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

PREFACE

There will be time to audit
The accounts later, there will be sunlight later
And the equation will come out at last.
Louis MacNeice, 'Autumn Journal' (1939)

The thirties is a statement as well as a decade. And it is one that is frequently heard today, because while those years are gradually slipping from our grasp, what they have come to represent is ever more present: confusion, financial crises, rising unemployment, scepticism about politicians, questions about the proper reach of Britain's role in the world.

Famously, to W.H. Auden, sitting on a bar stool in 'one of the dives on Fifty-Second Street' in New York in September 1939, the thirties were a 'low, dishonest decade'. Looking back later, others followed him, labelling it 'the devil's decade', 'a dark tunnel', 'the locust years', a 'morbid age', a time tainted by the dolorous spectres of intractable unemployment, the Means Test and appeasement, that ended inexorably in the most terrible war the world has ever known. But others claimed that this was a partial picture. It ignored those areas of Britain largely unaffected by the 'Great Depression', where the symbols of prosperity were the growth of home ownership, new light industries, a consumer society – evidenced by rapidly multiplying acres of suburban semis, the hope of a Baby Austin in the garage, a branch of Woolworths in every town, roadhouses on every arterial road, lidos, cinemas, paid holidays, dance halls, greyhound racing, football pools, plate glass, the modernist and the 'moderne'. In sum, J.B. Priestley's new 'third England' to set alongside two old Englands – one 'byways England', slow, rural and benign, the other harsh, ugly and industrial.

'There ain't no universals in this man's town,' wrote Louis MacNeice in 1939. This book recognises the claims of all of these Englands (or rather Britains) to tell the story of the thirties. Its aim is to explore all three, to uncover the 'intimate history' of what it was like to live through the decade.

It is not one story; it is not three stories: it is hundreds of interwoven stories, from that of the Prime Minister(s) to a discontented North London schoolteacher, from three Kings to one rather anxious Oxford vicar's wife, from the economist J.M. Keynes and the novelist Virginia Woolf to the intermittently unemployed gardener Frank Forster and the astute Hull journalist Cyril Dunn. Lives, events, aspirations, plans and the tireless search for solutions by people who felt that after the trauma of the First World War it must be possible to reorder society better, and those for whom this disastrously failed. All fitting into a panorama of Britain in the thirties, a decade that haunts us today with the magnitude of its problems, the paucity of its solutions, the dreadfulness of its ending, while snaring us with the boldness of its political and social experiments, the earnestness of its blueprints, the yearnings of its young, and the sheer glamour of its design, art, architecture, fashion, dream palaces, dance halls, and obsession with speed.

The story begins on the last day of 1929; it has no conclusion other than the outbreak of the Second World War on 3 September 1939, which, while not formally ending the decade, definitively foreclosed thirties Britain.

Juliet Gardiner
November 2009

A NOTE ON MONEY

Translating the value of money is fraught with difficulties. As Adam Smith wrote in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776): 'The real price of every thing, what every thing really costs to the man who wants to acquire it, is the toil and trouble of acquiring it . . . but it is not that by which their value is estimated . . . Every commodity is more frequently exchanged for, and thereby compared with other commodities.'

www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare suggests that there are five indices that can be used to compare monetary values in different eras. I have generally chosen the lowest (the retail price index), which multiplies a sum by roughly fifty – so that £100 in the 1930s would equal almost £5,000 today. But perhaps a more useful guide is to remember that in 1935 a working man would earn between £3 and £4 a week, and that an average semi-detached suburban house would have cost between £500 and £750.

PART ONE

How it was Then

PROLOGUE

The Eve of the Decade

'Wi' ye nae git out fra under ma feet,' seven-year-old Robert Pope's mother, wielding a mop and a bucket, scolded as she shooed him out of the house. The string bag full of jam jars he was clutching banged against his shins as he ran along Maxwell Street in Paisley to meet his friends. It was Hogmanay, the last day of the year 1929: the day that Scottish housewives busied themselves 'redding' (readying) their homes in a frenzy of mopping, sweeping, scrubbing, polishing, dusting, all to make sure that they were as clean as the proverbial new pin to welcome the New Year in through the front door as the Old Year slipped out by the back. The tallyman should have been paid off too, and any goods 'on tick' settled, since it was considered bad luck to start the New Year in debt. But that wouldn't be so easy.

By midday a queue of almost a thousand children, some clutching the hands of smaller siblings, others with bairns little more than babies in their arms, were waiting outside the Glen cinema in the centre of town. Admission was a penny for the stalls, tuppence for the balcony, and those children whose fathers were maybe out of work, or had been killed in the Great War that had ended just over a decade earlier, and whose mothers hadn't been able to spare the necessary coins, had scoured their tenement homes for empty bottles or jam jars to take back to the shop with the promise that the returned deposit could be used for the cinema.

The Glen, with its ornate façade and stained-glass windows, was one of six cinemas in Paisley, a town lying in Glasgow's southern shadow. If cinema-going was popular with adults – and it was, with some eighteen to nineteen million attendances every week in the 1930s – it was even more so for children. And if that was true of the South, it was more so in the North: in 1933 it was reported that seven out of ten children in Edinburgh went to the pictures at least once a week, most to the special Saturday-afternoon shows that cinema managers laid on for children, filling the seats by showing usually old films at cheap prices. 'Most children spend longer at the cinema than they do at many school subjects,' wrote Richard Ford,

who organised cinema clubs for children for the Odeon cinema chain, and reckoned that by 1939 some 4,600,000 children went to the cinema every week all over Britain.

In Paisley the Glen had started life as accommodation for a crypto-Masonic sect called the Good Templars, a temperance movement founded in 1850 to encourage moderation in, or preferably total abstinence from, the consumption of alcohol. As an encouragement to the sober life, the Templars organised various non-alcoholic entertainments, including tea concerts which were held on Saturday afternoons and were known as 'Bursts', since those attending were handed a paper bag containing an apple and an orange and at some point were encouraged to blow up their paper bags and burst them simultaneously. In homage to this innocent way of passing a dull afternoon, those watching silent films once the Glen had been converted into a cinema in 1910 (since lack of enthusiasm for temperance had by then reduced the Templars to holding their meetings in the basement) would burst a paper bag at appropriate moments in a film, such as a gunshot; and even when the introduction of the 'talkies' in the late 1920s rendered this unnecessary, there were children who were gamely prepared to uphold the tradition.

Over a thousand children were packed into the Glen that Hogmanay afternoon. Most found seats, but the cinema could accommodate an additional 140 standing in the gangways both downstairs and in the more expensive balcony, where children were not allowed, though some slipped in regardless. The main feature was a silent film, *The Crowd*, but this was preceded by a short western which starred the ever-popular Tom Mix as a bareback-riding, lasso-twirling cowboy in one of the last silent films Mix made on his self-constructed film-set ranch, 'a complete frontier town . . . typical of the early Western era', Mixville in California.

At 2 p.m. the lights dimmed and a cheer went up as the children settled down to watch the film, with loud cheers or catcalls as the action unfolded. But about halfway through the second reel (which had to be changed manually) dense, sulphurous carbon-monoxide-laden smoke began to fill the auditorium, and the children started to panic. 'Fire!' one shouted – though there wasn't – prompting a mass stampede for the exits. Most of the children made for a side door that led to a narrow staircase down into an alleyway. But when they reached the bottom they found that the exit was barred by an iron trellis gate that was firmly padlocked in place. However much they pushed and screamed, the gate would not yield, as more and more frightened children continued to push down the stairs, stumbling, falling, fainting, crushed underfoot.

Others ran into the lavatories, where they smashed the windows to get out, cutting their arms and legs on the jagged shards as they did so. Those in the balcony jumped down into the auditorium, adding to the panic, and a heavy swing door was wrenched off its hinges by small boys finding a superhuman strength in their desperation. Some children lost precious minutes frantically searching for a mislaid shoe, a discarded scarf, fearing that with money so tight, they would get in trouble if they came home having lost an item of clothing.

By now smoke was swirling into the street, and anxious passers-by tried to get into the building. Driven back by the dense smoke, they summoned the police, who smashed all the windows of the cinema with their batons to let the noxious fumes escape. Within minutes the fire brigade had arrived. 'Several people cried out "For God's sake get your smoke helmets: we can't get through the smoke. The cinema's full of children,"' the Deputy-Chief Fire Marshal reported. 'As soon as my men heard about the children there was no holding them back. Smoke helmets or no smoke helmets we were off the engine into the cinema with no delay.' The firemen were followed by members of the public clutching handkerchiefs over their mouths to try to protect themselves from inhaling the smoke.

A terrible sight met their eyes: sweets, comics, torn clothes lay scattered in disarray all over the floor, seats were upturned, there were pools of blood near the doorways and windows where children had tried to claw their way out. And there were the children: heaps of contorted bodies, most dead, some unconscious, piled up in nightmarish heaps, still and grotesque. 'Behind the screen,' reported Deputy-Chief Fire Marshal Wilson, 'the space was packed with children huddled together in every conceivable attitude. They were as tightly packed as a wall of cement bags. Some still moved, others were motionless, blue in the face . . . some were able to scream . . . Legs and arms were intertwined in the most appalling tangle. In some cases it took two of us working very gradually to extricate one child.' The oldest victim was thirteen, the youngest a toddler of eighteen months, and there were all ages in between, siblings, friends, neighbours, all dead or mortally injured, trapped in a 'pleasure palace' on the last day of the decade.

Those children who could walk were led out, shocked, shaken and in some cases hysterical; others were carried to ambulances, private cars and buses to be taken to the Royal Alexandra Infirmary, suffering from carbon-monoxide poisoning or injuries sustained in the crush to get out. A tramway Inspector turned the passengers off a couple of trams and requisitioned them to convey the injured to hospital, while the workers at a nearby print factory downed tools and hurried to the Glen to carry twenty children to

the safety of their works. Again and again the firemen went back, sometimes accompanied by desperate parents searching for their offspring. 'Two small bodies were found huddled together in the orchestra pit. It appeared as if two children had crept there for safety after finding the passage to the door blocked by the bodies of their young friends,' and several more bodies were found under upturned seats. A father staggered out carrying his small son, blue in the face, his head lolling lifelessly.

By 4 p.m. the cinema had been cleared: two hours after the matinee had started, fifty-nine children had been pronounced dead on arrival at the Infirmary. Many had barely a mark on them, suffocated by the weight of others frantically trying to get out, while others 'bore scratches on their face, hands and knees, eloquent testimony to the desperation with which they had struggled to get out of the death trap . . . So rapidly were the victims brought in that, in order to make room for those who were alive, the bodies were hurried to a lift and conveyed to the basement. Here they were placed on trolleys by twos and threes and rushed along a tunnel to the mortuary. Numbers grew so rapidly that the mortuary was soon full and other rooms [including the hospital chapel] had to be used to accommodate the bodies.' That night ten more children died from their injuries: the final death toll in the Glen cinema disaster was seventy-one. One family lost all three children, another four families lost two children each. Robert Pope's name was not among the list of the dead, but many of his schoolfriends' were. A BBC New Year programme from Scotland was pulled and a four-minute silence broadcast instead. And the streets of Paisley, usually packed with revellers at Hogmanay, were eerily empty and silent.

The King, George V, and Queen Mary sent messages of sympathy, so did the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, and another Scot, the music-hall star Sir Harry Lauder. Condolences, money and offers of help poured in from all over the world, as did offers to adopt the survivors – something no one wanted even to consider.

The funerals of sixty of the victims were held on 4 January 1930. It was a bleak, grey day, with intermittent flurries of sleet as the funeral processions started out. Flags on public buildings flew at half-mast, and as services in Paisley Abbey and the four Roman Catholic churches in the town started at 11 a.m., shops shut their doors and drew their blinds as a mark of respect. Crowds lined the route, everyone wearing black or a black armband, many hurriedly made from crêpe paper; the only relief came from the wreaths atop the coffins and from the flash of white on the uniforms of the Boys' Brigade band as they followed the white coffin of one of their members, twelve-year-old Robert Wingate, playing the heartbreaking lament 'Flowers o' the Forest'

as the coffin was carried up the nave of Paisley Abbey. Journalists came too, compelled by their own headlines – 'Scotland's Worst ever Cinema Disaster' – and cinema operators from all over Britain joined the mourners, hats in hands, heads bowed.

Paisley Council, mindful that many families would not be able to afford the cost of burying their dead children, offered a free burial ground at Hawkhead Municipal Cemetery for those who could not afford a plot, and the town's team of ten gravediggers was trebled to thirty. Tragically, some of this swollen workforce found themselves digging the final resting place of their own child.

Two days earlier, on 2 January, the Glen cinema manager Charles Dorward had been arrested and charged with culpable homicide. The charge hung on whether the metal trellis gate that had trapped so many of the dead had been padlocked rather than left unlocked during the performance, as it should have been according to health and safety regulations. Dorward was released on bail of £750, and hastily packed and left his home in the town where so many families had been touched by the disaster.

The case was heard before the Lord Advocate, Craigie Aitchison KC, in Edinburgh on 29 April 1930. During the proceedings it came out that on the morning of the fire the cinema had been inspected by members of the Paisley Fire Brigade, who had pronounced it safe. The Glen's owner, James Graham, agreed that there were insufficient exits, and claimed that he had repeatedly reminded Dorward that under no circumstances were the gates to be shut during matinee performances. The manager replied that they were locked on occasions to stop children who hadn't bought tickets from slipping in for free during the film. Graham replied that 'he didn't care if the whole of Paisley slipped in; the gates must be kept open'. A policeman gave evidence that when he arrived on the scene the gates were padlocked, but Dorward was adamant that he had opened them himself before the start of the matinee on 31 December 1929. The cinema chocolate girl, Isla Muir, confirmed that she had seen him open the gates. She was unable to say how they came to be closed subsequently, but suggested that two boys she had seen hanging about outside might have been responsible. After a trial lasting only two days, Charles Dorward was found not guilty by the unanimous verdict of the jury. It was concluded that although cigarette butts, spent matches and an empty cigarette box had been found in the projection room – where smoking was not permitted – these were not the cause of the film combusting: rather it was the carelessness of a fifteen-year-old assistant, James McVey, who had put a metal canister containing the first reel of nitrate on top of a battery, causing a short circuit, that was to blame, though once

the film started to smoke, the limited number of exits, the shortage of attendants and the excessive number of children packed into the cinema that afternoon had all contributed materially to the tragedy.

Lessons were learned from the Glen cinema disaster. In the new decade many municipal authorities – Glasgow included – ordered an inspection of all theatres and cinemas under their jurisdiction. Licences were scrutinised and the fitness of those holding them checked, legislation was introduced to check the 'tuppenny rush' at children's matinees, those under seven must be accompanied by an adult, there had to be a higher ratio of attendants to children, and the Cinematograph Act of 1909 was updated to extend local authorities' powers to ensure that all cinemas had a greater number of exits, that doors opened outwards and were fitted with push bars, and that seating capacity was limited, among other safety stipulations.

There was no counselling offered to the traumatised survivors. They were advised to forget about the terrible experience, and in an effort to help this healing process Paisley Town Council offered injured children and bereaved parents a week at the seaside. Small parties left Paisley a fortnight after the tragedy for West Kilbride and Dunoon. The relief fund was closed: it had raised £5,300.

It was a welcome sum. Paisley was a poor town. Although men such as the thread manufacturers Peter and James Coats, who were both worth more than £2 million (around £100 million in today's prices) when they died in 1913, had made their fortunes in Paisley, by 1929 the town was the victim of the industrial depression that swept the West of Scotland, the Valleys of Wales, and the manufacturing North and other pockets of England. Unemployment was high and rising, and wages were low for those in work in Paisley.

Yet even before the Glen cinema disaster brought the town unwanted publicity, Paisley's name was known throughout the English-speaking world. It was synonymous with soft woollen shawls bearing distinctive teardrop or tadpole patterns (probably representing the growing shoot of the date palm), usually in muted, smudged colours that had been greatly prized since the East India Company had first brought such shawls, woven of goatsdown, from Kashmir in the eighteenth century. Desirable these might have been, but they were fabulously expensive, so around 1780 weavers in Norwich and Edinburgh began to produce shawls 'in imitation of the Indian', using a new technique that reduced the cost of production by three-quarters. Paisley had a workforce of skilled weavers, but its silk industry had been hit badly by the Napoleonic Continental blockade. It seized on this new fashion accessory, and by the 1840s was effectively a one-industry town,

with a monopoly of such shawl production, with the so-called 'big corks' of Paisley buying the yarn and the designs and distributing them to cottage-industry handloom weavers. Shawl-making brought new prosperity to the town – though not to the weavers, who were now outworkers rather than creative artisans, and gradually, with the introduction of the Jacquard loom, factory hands. But since by definition fashion items are just that, there were slumps and booms throughout the nineteenth century, and by the twentieth coats and jackets had replaced shawls as outer wear. The weavers of Paisley persevered and adapted to making any new products that might sell, but by 1930 only vestiges remained of the weaving industry that had made the town's name go around the world. In mid-nineteenth-century Scotland the textile industry had employed over 20 per cent of the population; by 1931 the figure was less than 7 per cent, and those who could find work found it in thread manufacture, starching and dyeing.

Those who couldn't would take a train to nearby Glasgow, with a population in 1931 of over a million and still claiming to be the 'second city of the Empire'. But Glasgow had also been hard hit, with a large proportion of its resources tied up in what would become irredeemably depressed heavy industries: shipbuilding on the Clyde, where one-fifth of the world's tonnage of ships had been launched by the start of the First World War, coalmining in Lanarkshire, and jute and linen manufacture on Tayside. By 1930, while 16.1 per cent of the population of the United Kingdom was unemployed, in Scotland the figure was 18.5 per cent, and by 1933 it had soared to 26.1 per cent compared to the overall UK figure of 19.9 per cent. And for those in work, wages were low: less than 92 per cent of those earned in England. By 1931–32 that had fallen further, to 87 per cent. The thirties were always going to be a difficult decade for Paisley: now it had tragedy layered over hardship.

ONE

Goodbye to All That

> We have magneto trouble. How, then, can we start up again?
>
> John Maynard Keynes, December 1930

'It is difficult to see the wood for the trees,' mused Gerald Barry, then editor of Lord Beaverbrook's *Saturday Review*, though soon to resign on a question of principle and start the *Week-End Review*, and something of a connoisseur of English eccentricities and oddities, in a BBC broadcast on the final day of the 1920s. He rounded off his talk in much the same vein. 'We cannot put the jigsaw puzzle of the present together, because we are sitting on the pieces.' In between he surveyed the year that had passed, commenting on the progress of the R100 and the R101 airships, and on the 'thirst for speed . . . one of the significant tendencies of our time', which had been partially slaked by Sir Henry Segrave's 'remarkable motor-car record at Daytona Beach of 231 m.p.h.', and on the extraordinary weather, which 'began with extreme and prolonged cold which those of us with burst water pipes will not forget in a hurry . . . followed by a superb summer and a drought which caused many towns and villages great anxiety and stopped many of us watering our gardens and washing our cars', and ending with 'disastrous floods and record gales'. The number of motorists had continued to increase, and with them the number of accidents, as had what Barry called the 'continued uglification of the countryside'. On the credit side Stonehenge, Friday Street, Runnymede and many more 'notable spots' had been saved, and in Barry's mind the fierce controversies over Sir Gilbert Scott's design for a new power station at Battersea, the erection of pylons across the South Downs as part of the new electrical grid system and proposals for the new Charing Cross Bridge were evidence that 'in 1929 we have become more conscious of the need of beauty and orderliness in our midst'.

Barry's notion of sitting on a jigsaw, knowing that there were crucial pieces to be fitted together, but unable to see how they could coalesce, nonplussed by the odd shapes and irregularities of the pieces, the intransigent way one

could not be locked with what seemed to be its natural partner to make a satisfying whole, could be a metaphor that would carry all the way from the turn of the decade when he conjured up the image, through the 1930s. It would be a decade of despair and frustration for many, of confusion and stasis, and sometimes, in what seemed a purblind refusal to recognise the true nature of economic and social problems, of government inaction and public despair. Yet paradoxically, this decline would co-exist alongside rising wages and falling prices, a steady increase in living standards, a housing boom and unprecedented growth in domestic consumption. While abroad the thirties would be a decade of escalating tension and the rise of fascism – again met with uncertainty, irresolution, self-deception, misread signals, anxious hopes and missed opportunities – they were also years of experimentation, of hope, of resolution, of a confident belief that modernity had provided the tools with which to fashion a better future, above all a *planned* future, that mobilised politics, economics, science and the arts to build a brave new world (Aldous Huxley's novel – albeit a dystopia – was written in 1931 and published the following year). But while, of course, no one could be certain of the picture that would emerge from the disparate pieces at the start of 1930, there was the feeling that the coming decade would be significant. That the thirties would be very different from the twenties. As indeed they would.

The *Lady*, a magazine for women who lived a leisurely life in society, thought that 1930 'somehow assumes an added importance because it is a round number'. The magazine's columnist was 'curious' that given this 'added importance . . . most girls do not choose New Year's Day for their wedding instead of hastening to the altar in December. It seems such a very appropriate day for the beginning of a new life – or, at any rate a new enterprise.' One society girl did buck the trend in 1930 – though not entirely of her own volition: the wedding of Miss Zelia Hambro, daughter of Sir Percival Hambro of the merchant banking family, had to be rushed as the groom, Lieutenant Patrick Humphreys of the Royal Navy, was about to sail for China at short notice. For the wedding in Holy Trinity church, Sloane Street, Chelsea, the bride chose 'a really lovely dress, far too good for any festivities on the China station', and her mother, who was 'rather keen on politics and belongs to the Ladies Imperial Club' no doubt enlivened proceedings on the day by being 'one of the few women in London who smokes cigars – real ones, and not the little affairs provided for women who prefer something stronger'.

There was, however, a more serious investment in marking the end of the 1920s, ten years stained by the memory of the Great War, in which

5.7 million British men had joined the armed forces, of whom three-quarters of a million had been killed and more than one and a half million seriously wounded. Proportionately this was less than the French and German losses, but there was an overwhelming feeling of a 'lost generation', as perhaps more than 30 per cent of all men aged between twenty and twenty-four in 1914 were killed in the war, and 28 per cent of those aged thirteen to nineteen. Many of those seriously wounded – physically or mentally – never recovered, and certainly never worked again: the sight of a blind or maimed ex-serviceman trying to scrape a living by selling matches or bootlaces in the street, or simply by begging, was commonplace throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Two and a half million men were sufficiently disabled to qualify for a state pension, which was calculated on a harsh sliding scale: those suffering from the loss of two or more limbs, or major facial disfigurement, qualified for a full pension (27*s*.6*d* a week); the loss of a whole right arm brought 90 per cent of that; if the arm was intact below the shoulder but had been amputated above the elbow, or the veteran was totally deaf, that netted 70 per cent, falling to fourteen shillings a week if the amputation was below the elbow or knee, or the sight of one eye had been lost. On the assumption that most men were right-handed, the award was a shilling a week less in each category if it was the left arm that was involved, though if 'only' two fingers on either hand had been blown away, a man would receive 5*s*.6*d* a week. More than that, the war had come to the Home Front, with air raids claiming some 1,400 civilian lives and leaving 3,400 wounded.

The reminders of the war were material in so many ways. Within months of the Armistice on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, war memorials to commemorate the dead were being built in cities, towns and villages all over Britain, and plaques were being screwed on the walls of railway stations, police stations, depots, schools and factories in honour of 'the fallen'. On many of them it was difficult to find space to carve the litany of the dead: in Lancashire, for example, the Chorley Pals (which became Y Company of the 11th Battalion, the East Lancashire Regiment) lost 758 officers and men. The architect of Imperial Delhi, Sir Edwin Lutyens, designed a simple concrete altar to those slaughtered in the war to stand in the middle of Whitehall: it would stand like a reproach on an axis that crossed from the Prime Minister's residence to the War Office. A nameless corpse was selected from those buried as 'unknown' near the trench-riddled wastelands of northern France, transported by boat and train in a coffin made from an oak felled at Hampton Court and lowered into a grave just inside the west entrance of Westminster Abbey. Covered

with sandbags filled with sand from the Western Front, it was topped with a slab of black Tournai marble from Belgium bearing an inscription that included the words 'a British warrior unknown by name or rank'. King George V, finding himself – after a slow start – much affected by the notion, attended the funeral service for this poignant representative of Britain's lost generation on Armistice Day 1920 before unveiling Lutyens's stark concrete memorial. The ceremony concluded with a haunting rendition of the 'Last Post' that seemed to hang in the air.

Within five days over a million people had visited the grave and left hillocks of flowers at the cenotaph, and from that day forward Armistice Day has been commemorated throughout Britain by a two-minute silence as the eleventh hour strikes, those who fought and survived, and those who remembered, bowing their heads, in their buttonholes a fabric replica of the fragile, ubiquitous Flanders poppy adopted by the British Legion as the symbol of the debt owed to those whose blood seeped into the mud of the Western Front.

The new decade had a new government: David Lloyd George's wartime coalition had ended in 1922 when the Conservatives under Andrew Bonar Law withdrew their support, wishing to re-establish the old party system. Only it wasn't the old system: no longer was there a Conservative/Liberal duopoly alternating in power as it had throughout most of the nineteenth century, up until the First World War. Henceforth the Labour Party, which had only been founded in 1900, would provide the main opposition to the Conservatives. The Liberal Party had split during the war between those who were loyal to the former leader Herbert Asquith – known as 'Asquithian Liberals' – and those who grouped around Lloyd George – the 'National Liberals'.

After the 1922 election each faction claimed roughly the same number of MPs – between fifty and sixty – but the electoral system, which the Liberals had failed to reform when they had the opportunity, meant that with their support spread thinly across the country and the classes, they were increasingly doomed to be runners-up to Labour in industrial and urban seats, and to the Conservatives in wealthy and rural ones. Labour enjoyed its first taste of government – albeit a brief one – between January and November 1924. On taking power, the Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald had two objectives. One was to dispose of the Liberal Party, the other to prove that Labour was fit to govern. In both he succeeded, although the Liberal Party's decline was slow. However, by 1929 although the Liberals polled over five million votes, this translated into only fifty-nine MPs, mainly returned from Celtic fringe constituencies around the

edge of Britain. By comparison the Conservatives won 260 seats and Labour 287.

The electorate that voted in the second Labour government that year had increased since 1918 by almost 30 per cent to nearly twenty-nine million – 91 per cent of the adult population were now eligible to vote, with women given the vote at the same age as men – twenty-one – rather than thirty, as had been the case when women's suffrage had first been granted in 1918.

The second Labour government had a small majority and a massive problem: unemployment. The Conservatives had narrowly lost the election campaigning under the slogan 'Safety First', copied from a campaign to reduce the number of road accidents. But it seemed that what was needed was less caution, and more action and imagination. The economy was out of balance, with more than a million workers unemployed on average throughout most of the 1920s.

The causes were complex: the war of course was partly to blame. The four years of conflict had cost – in monetary terms – £11,325 million, including loans to allies to help them fight the war; many of these, including those to Russia, would never be repaid. The war was paid for partly out of taxation, partly by liquidating foreign investment, but mainly by loans both from home and overseas. The national debt, which had stood at £620 million in 1914, had risen to £8,000 million by 1924 – the largest slice of it owed to the United States. This led to a vicious spiral: something approaching half the country's annual expenditure of £800 million went on servicing this debt, meaning that of the revenue raised by income tax, which had risen to an unprecedented five shillings in the pound by 1924, a quarter went towards debt repayment.

Stanley Baldwin, essentially Prime Minister when Ramsay MacDonald was not, that is three times between 1923 and 1937, was a Worcestershire ironmaster whose companies had profited from wartime munitions contracts. Baldwin made an honourable (and discreet) gesture by sending a personal cheque for £120,000 to the Treasury, and there was talk of a national levy. But the problem was not solely debt. The requirements of peace were very different from those of war, and the heavy industries that had expanded to fulfil military needs now found themselves with spare capacity and an export market cut by half, with American and Japanese manufacturers moving into former British markets.

Before the war Britain had been one of the most prosperous countries in the world. After a century and a half of economic growth, expanding trade and shrewd overseas investment, Britain could claim to be among the major industrialised nations and the undisputed hub of international trade

and finance. Lancashire cotton mills produced sufficient yarn and textiles to clothe half the world, the shipbuilders of the North-East alone produced a third of the world's output, Britain was the second largest producer of coal in the world; its merchant fleet accounted for almost half the world's tonnage, while Britain was a major international creditor with a large inflow of invisible earnings from investments, shipping and insurance.

However, there were serious long-term structural problems that exacerbated the consequences of war. Britain's prosperity had depended largely on 'old staples' – coal, iron, steel, textiles and shipbuilding – which had provided three-quarters of the country's exports and employed almost a quarter of the working population. At the turn of the century more recently industrialised countries such as Germany and the United States had challenged Britain's position as the 'workshop of the world', and were developing new industries such as chemicals, electrical goods and engineering more rapidly than Britain. The appeal of overseas investment, and a dependence on the Empire as the market for British goods, had led to a neglect of the domestic market and the opportunities offered by these new industries. By 1913 Britain's economic growth was little more than half what it had been in 1900, and its share of world trade had dropped from a third in 1870 to a seventh by 1914.

The necessities of war boosted Britain's traditional heavy industries – particularly those linked to the production of munitions and textiles, such as the Scottish jute industry, which was kept at full stretch manufacturing sandbags – and provided a stimulus to accelerate the development of newer ones such as electrical goods, aircraft and motor construction, precision engineering, radio and pharmaceuticals. A post-war boom fuelled by rising prices and the speculative investment of wartime profits lulled people into thinking that the normal rhythms of trade and production would soon be reasserted, and Britain would regain her pre-war markets. Indeed, there was a 'craze of speculation' in Lancashire, where old textile mills were bought and sold and new ones constructed in eager anticipation of an export boom, and shipyard owners shared a similar confidence. In 1920 coal still made up 9 per cent of Britain's exports – only 1 per cent less than in 1913. But the boom was short-lived: by 1921 increases in interest rates and a fall in prices on the world market hit exports, which in turn hit production, and by the winter of 1921–22 more than two million British men and women were unemployed. Cotton textile exports fell to less than half the 1913 figure by 1929, and would never again reach pre-war levels, while coal represented less than 7 per cent of exports: down from 287 million tons in 1913 to forty million by 1922.

It wasn't only the 'old staples' that were in decline: London was losing its pre-war position as the financial capital of the world as the City lost its exclusive authority over monetary policy at home. During the war financial exigencies had forced Britain off the Gold Standard, with the issue of paper £1 and ten-shilling notes that could no longer be converted directly into gold. Financial orthodoxy regarded a return to the Gold Standard as a prerequisite for economic stability: it was essential that the 'pound should look the dollar in the face'. As far as Lord Bradbury (a former head of the Treasury who chaired a committee appointed in 1924 to advise the newly appointed Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, Winston Churchill, on the matter) was concerned, it was not so much a question of whether the pound was overvalued in relation to the dollar, as of removing monetary policy from political influence: in his eyes the Gold Standard was 'knave-proof'. The Governor of the Bank of England, Montagu Norman, agreed: the Gold Standard was the best 'Governor' a fallibly human world could have. It was ominously portentous that the notion of the government 'meddling' in economic matters was regarded with suspicion and distaste. On the whole gold occupied the same iconic position for the Labour Party, and it was left to the economist John Maynard Keynes, who in *The Economic Consequences of Winston Churchill* (a title resonant of his Cassandra-like warnings of the effects of harsh reparation payments imposed on Germany in 1919, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*), published in 1925, to put the case against, or rather to point out the consequences if the Gold Standard was re-embraced. These included rising unemployment as the bank rate rose and cheap money was denied for industrial investment. In 1925 Britain went back onto the Gold Standard: the bank rate averaged 5 per cent for the rest of the decade, making the country uncompetitive in the world market, particularly against the United States, which was enjoying boom conditions at the time.

How far and how deep would the pernicious stain of unemployment, which throughout the 1920s had never been less than a million, spread? How could men earn a living when the great staples on which Britain's industrial might had been built over nearly two centuries – iron, steel, textiles, coal, shipbuilding – were losing out to competition from Europe and the United States?

In coalmining areas such as South Wales, the Lowlands of Scotland and Lancashire, the future was bleak. Men had no work in the pits; women were laid off from the textile mills. British exports were no longer competitive in the world market. Labour costs were high – nearly double what they had been in 1914 – whereas the cost of living had only risen by 75 per cent,

and the average working week had been reduced by ten hours. In crude terms, those in work were being paid more for working less. Hence the tensions between employers and their workforces – particularly in the mining industry – when international competition undercut prices and eroded markets.

How would Britain be governed, now that the old duopoly of Conservative and Liberal had been definitively replaced by new sparring partners: Labour and Conservative, alternating in power since neither seemed to have satisfactory answers to the country's economic and social ills. Would the bitter legacy of the 1926 General Strike be gradually softened, even though its collapse had brought no resolution to the fundamental problems that had caused it?

On 24 October 1929 on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, '12,894,650 shares changed hands, many of them at prices that shattered the dreams and hopes of those who had owned them', wrote the economist J.K. Galbraith in his book *The Great Crash*. Prices on the US market went into freefall, and financial companies as well as individual men and women who had speculated on the over-buoyant American economy lost their fortunes, or their modest savings, overnight. On that 'Black Thursday' (which would be followed by 'Black Monday' and 'Black Tuesday') a record 12.9 million shares were traded: the press reported losses of $30 billion over four days, and there were rumours that eleven speculators had already committed suicide. Watching the 'wild turmoil' on the floor from the public gallery of the New York Stock Exchange was Winston Churchill, former British Chancellor of the Exchequer, 'he who in 1925 had returned Britain to the Gold Standard and the overvalued pound. Accordingly he was responsible for the strain that sent Montagu Norman to plead in New York for easier money, which caused credit to be eased at that fatal time, which, in this academy view, in turn caused the boom. Now Churchill, it could be imagined, was viewing his awful handiwork.' However, there is no record of anyone having reproached him. Economics was never his strong point, so (and wisely) it seems most unlikely that he reproached himself. But, having invested heavily in the market, he himself lost a large percentage of his savings when it crashed, though he waxed philosophical: 'No one who has gazed on such a scene could doubt that this financial disaster, huge as it is, cruel as it is to thousands, is only a passing episode.'

The US market continued to decline, reaching its lowest point in July 1932, when it had fallen 89 per cent from its peak in 1929. Unemployment went from 1.5 million in 1929 to 12.8 million, or 24.75 per cent of the workforce, by 1933. 'Liquidate labor, liquidate stocks, liquidate the farmers,

liquidate real estate,' the Secretary of the Treasury, Andrew Mellon, had advised. 'It will purge the rottenness out of the system . . . People will work harder, live a more moral life. Values will be adjusted and enterprising people will pick up the wrecks from less competent people.'

The Great Depression bit deeper in America (as it did in Germany) than it did in Britain, and lasted much longer, but although J.M. Keynes couldn't help 'heaving a big sigh of relief at what seemed like the removal of an incubus which has been lying heavily on the business life of the whole world outside America', the effect of the Wall Street Crash on trade worldwide would prove deleterious in the next few years. The US government initially raised tariffs against foreign imports and its overseas investment all but dried up, forcing Europe to pay for imports and pay off debts in gold which was sucked into the vaults of America (and France, which had somehow managed to stand aside from the economic crisis). This had serious long-term consequences for the international circulation of money, and led to a collapse in commodity prices and an economic slowdown. 'Almost throughout the world, gold has been withdrawn from circulation. It no longer passes from hand to hand, and the touch of metal has been taken from men's greedy palms' Keynes noted.

Yet, speaking only a matter of weeks after that cacophony of black days in New York and growing anxiety about their effect on Britain's already ailing, out-of-joint economy, Gerald Barry thought he saw some scattered green shoots, a few straws in the wind that he might clutch at: the summer of 1929 had witnessed a lockout in the cotton industry which was solved, he said, 'on the principle of rough justice whereby Solomon cut the baby in half', meaning that each side agreed to accept 50 per cent of what it wanted. He was optimistic that the *rapprochement* between capital and labour begun in 1929 by the Melchett–Turner conversations (tentative corporatist interchanges between Lord Melchett – or Sir Alfred Mond, as he had been until 1928 – chairman of the recently amalgamated giant chemical firm ICI, and the trade union leader Ben Turner, which ultimately led nowhere) had been 'further cemented'. And he also saw signs of co-operation paying dividends in agriculture, 'that Cinderella of home industries', with initiatives from the Ministry of Agriculture for a series of marketing schemes for foodstuffs such as flour, fruit, eggs and meat.

The shadow of the Great War had darkened the 1920s; in the 1930s men and women would grow to maturity who had no memory of that terrible carnage, and on the cusp of the decades international peace and accommodation seemed assured, with the Labour Foreign Secretary Arthur Henderson's agreement to withdraw the last British troops from the Rhine.

Confrontations between the incorruptible Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Snowden and the ever-rotating French Finance Ministers showed, however, that tensions over the peace treaty of 1919 were by no means entirely relaxed, and the issue of war debts to the United States continued to be a live and fractious issue. Even so, perhaps Barry's optimism was justified. Perhaps Britain's economic and social ills really could still be put down to the working out of the dislocations of war, the turbulence could be expected to fade away, the normal rhythms of trade and production would reassert themselves, and British society would return to an equilibrium that it had, in fact, never really known.