Depression, war and recovery in Wales and England, 1930-1951

The Depression Years in Wales and England, 1930-1939

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George Segal 1991, *Depression Bread Line*, (a sculpture commemorating the Depression).

Why did the Depression happen?

Problems with traditional industry

Before the Great War, Britain's prosperity had depended on the sale of heavy industrial goods such as coal and steel. However, at the end of the war, these older traditional industries entered a period of decline. Rising costs in production, obsolete methods and a failure to invest in new technology and machinery contributed to the decline in these traditional industries. There was a fall in demand for British goods and increased competition from abroad particularly from the USA and Germany. The more expensive British goods could not compete with cheaper imports. To make matters worse, Britain's traditional pre-war export markets (countries that represented the core of the economic strength of the Empire such as Australia, Canada and New Zealand) were no longer prepared to buy British. They bought US steel, German coal and Indian cotton instead. This brought to an end the so-called 'golden age' of Welsh and British heavy industry. When the worldwide economic Depression arrived in the early 1930s, Britain's old industries could not cope.

The Wall Street Crash

The principal cause of the Depression was the Wall Street Crash of 1929. The collapse of the US stock market caused a financial crisis in which some major banks in the USA ceased trading and many businesses were plunged into bankruptcy. This led to rising unemployment which added to the economic problems as it led to a reduction in spending. As unemployment rose, sales declined further. The way to end a depression is to get people to buy things, but the US government did not know how to do this.

The US president, Herbert Hoover, became alarmed. Unsure of what to do, he called in America's huge loans to other countries. He also put up customs barriers by imposing high tariffs to stop imports of foreign goods. However, instead of protecting America, Hoover's policy simply spread the Depression across the rest of the world which also fell into an economic slump. It has been said, 'When America sneezes, the rest of the world catches cold.'

Impact on the British economy and employment

The massive financial crisis in America, the Wall Street Crash, led to the collapse of the largest, richest and most powerful economy in the world. Britain, Europe and many of the world's industrial powers had come to depend on US loans and trade. When America's economy crashed, so did theirs. This was the beginning of a world slump; its effects on Wales and England were devastating. The world slump in production and trade lasted longer and was deeper than many governments had imagined. The slump turned into a depression because it affected both employers and employees. Some businesses crashed while others struggled to survive. Production slumped because orders declined. This in turn led to many companies laying off workers. Unfortunately, these redundancies and dismissals contributed to the Depression because as unemployment rose, the decline in orders fell even more sharply.

Clearly, the crisis of 1929 had a significant impact on the British economy, but it may be argued that Britain was already suffering from the effects of economic decline before the crisis of 1929. The collapse of the post-war economic boom in 1921, increased competition from abroad, the disaster of the General Strike of 1926 and the decline in the mining and steel industries crippled the British economy. Therefore, it is probably fair to say that the crisis of 1929 simply made an already bad situation worse.

Impact on British politics

Perhaps the most significant impact of the 1929 crisis was on British politics. When the crisis hit Britain in 1929, many politicians were convinced that the economy would right itself. They felt that economic recovery was better left to businessmen rather than politicians. In the long run all would be well was their response. The famous economist John Maynard Keynes disagreed. ‘In the long run we are all dead,’ was his cynical reply. A minority of politicians simply did not know how best to solve the crisis. More radical politicians, such as Labour’s Sir Oswald Mosley, called for massive government spending to create jobs and for high tariffs on foreign imports to protect British industry. Keynes and the leader of the opposition Liberals, David Lloyd George, tried to persuade the government to accept Mosley’s plan for action, but they rejected it. Nevertheless, the crisis got so bad that it was agreed that, as in wartime, party political differences should be set aside. In 1931 a National Government was set up. Led by Labour’s Ramsay Macdonald, this coalition government, of mainly Conservatives with some Labour and Liberal MPs, tried to cope with the worsening economic and social crisis.

Impact on British people

Many people lost their jobs as a result of the Depression. The unemployed had no wages and could not buy things. This resulted in more businesses going bankrupt which in turn created more unemployment. This was a vicious circle made worse by the fact that the dole or unemployment benefits were barely enough to pay the rent, let alone feed and clothe a family.

The government responded to the crisis by trying to cut costs. The first target of these cuts was the benefits paid to the unemployed. A man without work was entitled to benefit under the unemployment insurance scheme. This was known as the dole and it was paid for the first six months. However, in order to qualify for dole, a worker had to pass a means test which was introduced in 1931. Public Assistance Committees were set up to investigate a family’s finances thoroughly before benefits could be given. The intrusiveness of the means test, and the insensitive manner adopted by some officials who carried it out, frustrated and offended many people. The usual rate for the dole was 15s. (75p) per week for man and wife and about 5s. (25p) for each child. The British Medical Association estimated that a family of two adults and three children needed at least 22s. 7d. (£1.12) for food for a week. To make matters worse, in 1931 the dole was cut by 10 per cent.

Life was very hard for those people whose lives were blighted by unemployment.

How did the Depression affect people's lives?

One of the major effects of the world slump in trade and industrial production was the massive rise in unemployment. By 1933 world unemployment topped 30 million people of whom some 3 million were British, around 13 million were American and 6 million were German. The worst hit areas in Britain were those still dependent on the old heavy industries. Thus, the two worst affected areas of Britain were in south Wales and in the north-east of England. By 1938 the unemployment rate in each of the four basic heavy industries of coal, cotton, shipbuilding and steel was twice what it was in other forms of employment. In these areas, and in these industries, unemployment became a way of life.

Source A: 1930s Jarrow – a visit from the soup van.

Source B: A miner and his family, Rhondda valley, 1931, before mass unemployment hit the valley.

Impact of mass unemployment on people in the industrial areas

Mass unemployment was a human tragedy that led to a loss of dignity and a sense of hopelessness. Rising unemployment affected women as well as men. In many cases, the man was the sole breadwinner so that when he lost his job the whole family suffered. Women were forced to 'make ends meet' either by maintaining the home on a limited budget or, if they were fortunate, by seeking (often poorly paid) employment in domestic service or in retail as shop assistants. Unemployment led to poverty which affected the health, both physical and mental, of those who suffered from its effects. Evidence of the effects of unemployment and poverty is provided in a report written in 1933 by Dr Rankin, Chief Medical Officer for Gelligaer District Council:

> The district has again had a continued epidemic of scarlet fever during the year, the majority of cases being of severe type. The general want of resistance to attack and the severity of the symptoms were, in my opinion, due to general malnutrition among the children, the result of the unfortunate economic conditions in South Wales.[1]

Whole communities became depressed and were depressing places to live. According to one eyewitness, Dora Cox, the situation had become desperate. Interviewed in 1985, she said:

> Living in Wales one could see much more clearly the absolutely humiliating and devastating effect of unemployment on people, particularly in the valleys, where all hope seemed to be gone. Men were standing on the street corners not knowing what to do with themselves – people were really hungry. Well you couldn't not take part in any activity, which would make people themselves feel that, at least, they were fighting back and, also, you felt it was absolutely essential to get other people to understand the enormity of the situation .[2]

This caused many individuals and families to relocate in search of work. Migration from the north-east of England and from south Wales to the wealthier and least affected areas of the Midlands and the south-east of England increased during the 1930s.

Reaction to the Depression: protest

Unlike Dylan Thomas, the vast majority of people in traditional industrial areas could not so easily escape the Depression. The government's apparent inability to deal with the Depression convinced many people that there was no alternative but to protest. A mass demonstration with popular support and maximum publicity might force the government into positive action. Thousands of people became involved in resisting the Depression and protesting against its effects and the continuing unemployment and hardship. In a letter in 1935 to Sir John Gilmour, the Home Secretary, the MP for the Rhondda, W. H. Mainwaring, stated:

[1] *Medical officer of health reports*, 1920-39 (The Welsh Board of Health Collection, National Library of Wales, Gallery 2).
[2] G. E. Jones and T. Herbert (eds.), *Wales between the Wars* (Cardiff, 1988).

> The Minister, perhaps, can make some attempt to imagine the depth of feeling in the Rhondda when I tell him that there is a total population of less than 140,000 and a week ago yesterday, 100,000 people demonstrated there. There was nobody in that district who was not demonstrating except those who were in hospital. I only wish to God that the same thing would happen in London.[3]

Mainwaring's concern to highlight the plight of the unemployed in his constituency is echoed in an article published in the local newspaper, the *Rhondda Leader*:

> People who have lived in the valley all their lives were sure that they had never witnessed such a scene of protest. It was not a movement begun by any particular party, but a united front of Union Officials, Communists, Ministers of Religion and business and professional men, with members of Parliament, Magistrates and Councillors, rubbing shoulders with all sections of the populace.[4]

However, not everyone was sympathetic to the problems suffered by the unemployed in Wales. A pamphlet entitled 'What's Wrong with Wales' (issued by the *New Statesman and Nation* magazine in 1935) believed that the poverty and hardship reported in Wales had been exaggerated:

> So many remedies have been tried in vain. South Wales has become a bore. It is like a crying babe in the hands of an ignorant mother. It is smacked by one Government department and kissed by another. Why won't it go to sleep like Dorsetshire?[5]

In 1936 King Edward VIII toured Wales to see for himself the hardship and poverty caused by the Depression. He was visibly upset by what he saw and shocked by the stories which he heard from the unemployed people he met. He was reported to have said, 'Something must be done.' Unfortunately, nothing was done. The following extract from a letter addressed to King Edward from some residents in Pontypool and published in the *Western Mail* in November 1936, might suggest why nothing was done:

> Today you will be visiting the towns and villages of our valleys, and a valley blighted by the dead hand of poverty. We regret that your tour has been planned in such a way that the terrible effects of this poverty will not be seen.[6]

[3] G. E. Jones and T. Herbert (eds.), *Wales between the Wars* (Cardiff, 1988).
[4] *Rhondda Leader*, 1935.
[5] *New Statesman and Nation*, 1935.
[6] *Western Mail*, 1936.

Hunger marches and their impact

Source C: Unemployed workers marching through Bristol in 1931.

During the 1930s, as well as local protests, there were also many protest marches from the north-east of England and south Wales. The people living in these areas were becoming more militant because they had been experiencing high levels of unemployment, poverty, malnutrition and disease for some time. The government seemed incapable of dealing with the problems or, at worst, appeared to be indifferent to the plight of the poor. Protesting in the areas in which they lived appeared to have little impact on the government, so it was decided to widen the protest. Marches to London were organised to confront the government and, in so doing, gain much needed publicity. It was hoped that the media would be encouraged to report their story and highlight their plight.

In October 1932 there was a large-scale march on London by 2,500 workers from all over the country. Trade unionists played a major role in organising the march and in arranging food and shelter for the marchers. They presented a petition to Parliament demanding the abolition of the means test and protesting about the 10 per cent cut in benefits.

Perhaps the most famous protest march was the Jarrow Crusade of 1936, but there were also marches from south Wales. Most demanded similar things – government action to create jobs and better benefits for the unemployed.

Source D: Jarrow marchers en route to London.

Historians are divided about the impact that these protest marches had. Even contemporaries were mixed in their opinions about the effectiveness of these marches. For example, the *Aberdare Leader*, a Welsh newspaper reported the following:

> Keen as the resentment is throughout the valleys against the new Means Test, the procession had the atmosphere of a Sunday School rally. There were smiles, jokes and laughter on every side. Men wore good-looking overcoats and suits, young fellows, many of them unemployed, wore smartly cut clothes, shining shoes and even yellow gloves, looking the mirror of fashion; young women walked in attractive hats, smart coats and dainty high heeled shoes. There was little outward indication of poverty and want such as the majority of the families of the unemployed are experiencing now. A true blue Tory supporter of the National Government would undoubtedly have pointed an accusing finger and said, 'Bah! Where is your poverty and hardship?'[7]

As the newspaper feared, some ministers in the government were less than impressed with the marches. In 1936 *The Times*, a London-based newspaper, reported on a speech given in Parliament by Sir Thomas Inskip, Minister of Defence:

> We hear a little too much about depressed areas, and not quite enough of what the spirit of these areas has achieved in bringing about her own recovery.[8]

[7] *Aberdare Leader*, 1936.
[8] *The Times*, 1935.
[9] *Daily Worker*, 1935.

A clearly frustrated editor of the *Daily Worker* newspaper reported:

> Not the slightest mention on any of the film newsreels of the Hunger Marches or of the tremendous London demonstrations. I have been looking out for them in the London cinemas but cannot find a trace; I suppose the same is true of all the local cinemas. So the distortion and suppression of the newsreels goes on . . . The Hunger Marches and the demonstrations are not news; but the visit of Princess Ingrid is very important news, as also is the visit of the Arsenal football team to France, and a woman swinging by her teeth over New York and so on.[9]

When the Jarrow marchers arrived in London, having walked almost 300 miles, they were met by a delegation consisting of the following:

> The Bishop of Jarrow
> Sir John Jarvis, Bt., MP
> The Lord Mayor of London
> Lord Snell, Chairman of London County Council
> Ellen Wilkinson, MP
> Councillor R. I. Dodds, ex-Mayor of Jarrow

Arrangements had been made to hold a special meeting at the Farringdon Memorial Hall, London, after which a petition would be presented to the government. The government did not react. The only glimmer of sympathy for the marchers came from the North-east Public Assistance Committee which recommended to the Durham County Public Assistance Committee that allowances should be paid to the dependants of men participating in the march. However, it is almost impossible not to conclude that in spite of gaining publicity, the Jarrow marchers had had little impact on the government.

Historian A. J. P. Taylor offered a more balanced evaluation of the effectiveness of the hunger marches and the march for jobs:

> Select bands of unemployed from the depressed areas marched on London, where they demonstrated to little purpose. Their progress through the country, however, was a propaganda stroke of great effect. The hunger marchers displayed the failure of capitalism. Middle-class people felt the call of conscience. They set up soup-kitchens for the marchers and accommodated them in local schools.[10]

The effect on the lives of women

The 1930s were marked by an increase in the amount of 'women's legislation' passed by Parliament. It also saw Britain's first female MPs. A huge number of organisations now represented women's interests. These included the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship, women's trade unions and the Women's Institute. That said, the lives of the majority of British women did not change that much during the 1930s. If anything, the Depression contributed to a decline in the women's movement. For example, the number of local branches of NUSEC dropped from 220 in 1920 to just 48 in 1935.

[10] A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914–1945. Oxford History of England* vol. 15 (Oxford, 1965).

A revived 'cult of domesticity', associated with mass circulation magazines such as *Woman*, emerged during the 1930s. Since the dominant ideology of the times dictated that the housewife's place was in the home, few women managed to break out from the limitations of the home into the public world of politics, commerce and the professions. The only opportunity available to the majority of women was in domestic service or in the retail trade as shop assistants. During this period the home remained the only place where many women had any influence of authority, which may explain why marriage rates rose rapidly. Maintaining the home on a tight budget was a constant source of stress and anxiety for women who worked very long hours in the struggle against poverty and grime. According to a report compiled by the Pilgrim's Trust, *Men Without Work*, published in 1938, the effect of this never-ending daily routine of hard work on women's pride, appearance and health, was devastating:

> The outstanding fact about many of these homes was that the men in them appeared to have higher standards of personal cleanliness than those reflected by their living conditions. It seemed, very largely, their womenfolk who had lost all pride in personal appearance and the appearance of the home. We must face the fact that to live constantly on a depressed standard of living, where life is a hand-to-mouth existence, is, except for the bravest souls, to experience the bitterness of defeat.[11]

As historian Deirdre Beddoe concluded, 'Women's employment prospects were bleak and home life and health left much to be desired.' That said, there is evidence to suggest that an increasing number of women participated in the campaigns to persuade the government to change its economic policy and to prevent cuts to benefits. In south Wales a female-led campaign to persuade mine owners to provide pit-head baths was successful. Many women took part in the hunger marches whilst others organised demonstrations of their own. For example, in 1935 women from the south Wales valleys attacked the Unemployment Assistance Board's offices in Merthyr. The experience of some women demonstrators is captured by Lewis Jones in his novel *We Live*:

> Half an hour before the demonstration was timed to start the women and children and the unemployed men in the streets were lined up with a red banner at their head with 'Sunny Bank Women want Bread not Batons'.[12]

Clearly, the Depression had a significant impact on the lives of women during the 1930s.

Escapism: entertainment and sport

Despite the Depression and unemployment, the years between the wars were rich in opportunities for people to enjoy themselves. For the thousands with time on their hands, affordable leisure became an important feature of everyday life. They might go to the races to bet on the dogs or horses, to a football or rugby match, to clubs or even to the free libraries to read books and newspapers. On the other hand, they might take advantage of modern technology to be entertained by sound – through radio in the home, or by sound and vision in the local cinema.

[11] *Men Without Work* (Cambridge, 1938).
[12] Lewis Jones, *We Live* (London, 1937).

The first radio, popularly known as the 'wireless', appeared in Britain in 1922. The first wireless or radio sets were expensive to buy and costly to licence, but within a few years mass production brought the price down to a level most people could afford. In 1926 the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was set up to run the new national radio service. Its task was to inform and entertain the listening public. This it did with a combination of live theatre, classical music and news programmes. Soon the BBC was broadcasting schools programmes, plays, popular music and comedy. Between 1929 and 1933 the sale of radio licences registered by the Post Office had doubled. In one year alone (1937) 56,970 wireless licences were issued in Cardiff, approximately one per household. The average cost of a radio licence was 15s. (75p). In 1937, after many years of campaigning, the BBC was persuaded to set up a Welsh service based in Cardiff to cater for the needs of Wales and its people. By 1939 nearly 75 per cent of British families owned a wireless set.

The biggest rival to radio was the cinema. For the price of a sixpenny (2p) ticket, the cinema offered an escape for many people from the harsh realities of life. A majority of the films shown in British cinemas were American, made in Hollywood. Film stars such as Clark Gable, Greta Garbo and Errol Flynn became famous across the world. It was the dream of every cinemagoer to meet their screen heroes or to become film stars themselves. During the 1930s one Welshman's dream became a reality. Raymond Truscott-Jones from Cadoxton in Neath left Wales to became famous as the Hollywood actor Ray Milland.

As the popularity of the cinema soared, so did the level of investment in films and buildings. By 1939 there were 4,776 cinemas in Britain which sold on average nearly 23 million tickets per week. The BBC feared that cinema would replace radio as the most popular form of entertainment. In 1936 the BBC began live television broadcasts but this new form of entertainment 'cinema in the home' was far too expensive for the majority of people. By 1939 there were only 50,000 viewers.

The famous novelist George Orwell commented on the powerful influence of cinema in his book, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, published in 1937:

> In nearly a decade of depression the two things that have probably made the greatest difference of all are the movies and the mass production of cheap smart clothes. A youth of 20 for £2 10s. [£2.50] on hire-purchase can buy himself a suit whilst the girl can look like a fashion plate at even lower prices. You may have three half pence in your pocket and not a prospect in the world, and only a corner of a leaky bedroom at home but, in your new clothes, you can stand on a street corner indulging in a private day-dream of yourself as Clark Gable or Greta Garbo which compensates you a great deal.[13]

The three most popular sports in the industrialised areas of south Wales and the north of England were rugby (union and league), football and boxing. Boxing was the sport of the working classes and during the Depression of the 1930s it became very popular. For many, boxing provided the means to escape their poverty and unemployment. Local clubs arranged bouts for which the boxers would be paid. The aim was to become a champion boxer but very few made it. Tommy Farr, an unemployed fairground fighter from Tonypandy, was perhaps the most successful Welsh boxer. He was remembered as 'the man who nearly beat Joe Louis' (the world champion from America).

[13] George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London, 1937).

Tackling the problems caused by the Depression

Dealing with unemployment

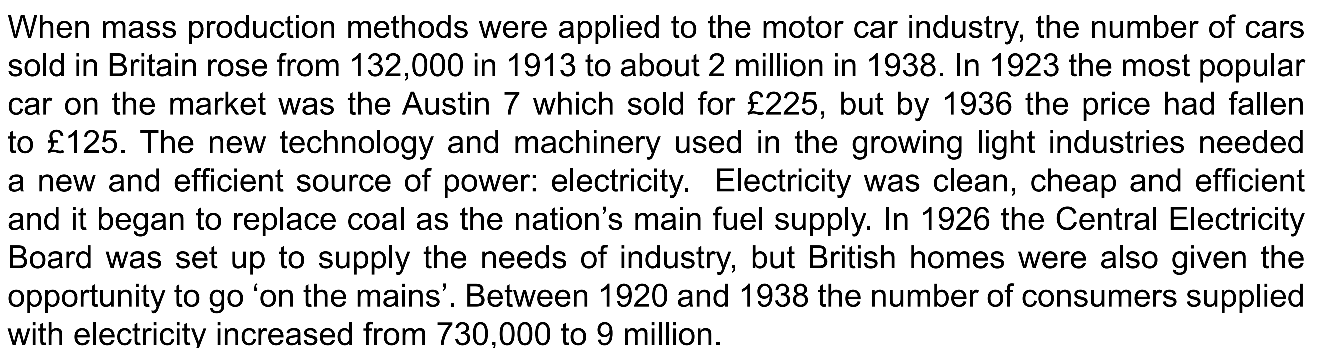
As unemployment continued to rise, the government was faced with a new problem, namely what to do about the long-term unemployed. These were the people who had been unemployed for more than six months and had used up their dole. As the cost of benefits rose, there were calls to reduce them further. In an effort to avoid bad publicity, the government passed the Unemployment Act of 1934 which set up the Unemployment Assistance Boards.

The UABs were responsible for managing the means test and ensuring that benefits were paid only to those who were ‘desperately in need’ and then only if they were ‘actively seeking work’. The means by which those ‘desperately in need’ were defined varied from area to area as some UABs applied the means test more rigorously than others. To solve this apparent inequality, the government decided that from 1934 unemployment benefit rates would be set nationally rather than locally. In addition, the 1934 Unemployment Act separated dole and insurance benefits, and the 10 per cent cut in dole was reversed.

From 1936 the UABs were made responsible for dealing with workers who had used up their insurance benefits. The UABs took over some of the work of the Labour Exchanges and continued to administer the dole and means test. UAB officials were less severe than officials who ran the Public Assistance Committees. The UABs set up training schemes and provided help to workers who wanted to move to another area to find work. Society went some way towards accepting that unemployment was not a failing of the people, dispelling the notion that the poor could work if they really wanted to.

Creating new industries

As the traditional heavy industries declined, the new light industries emerged to take their place. These industries tended to concentrate on consumer goods such as cars, cookers, fridges and radios. For an ever-expanding market, the goods were mass-produced in modern factories equipped with the latest technology. Consumers were encouraged by mass advertising to buy the new cars, radios and household gadgets on the new hire purchase system. This new system of credit meant that even the most expensive items could be bought by the ordinary consumer.



When mass production methods were applied to the motor car industry, the number of cars sold in Britain rose from 132,000 in 1913 to about 2 million in 1938. In 1923 the most popular car on the market was the Austin 7 which sold for £225, but by 1936 the price had fallen to £125. The new technology and machinery used in the growing light industries needed a new and efficient source of power: electricity. Electricity was clean, cheap and efficient and it began to replace coal as the nation’s main fuel supply. In 1926 the Central Electricity Board was set up to supply the needs of industry, but British homes were also given the opportunity to go ‘on the mains’. Between 1920 and 1938 the number of consumers supplied with electricity increased from 730,000 to 9 million.

The government encouraged these new industries by offering grants and by setting up industrial estates. It was thought that those made unemployed by the old industries would find jobs in the new industries. This did not happen. Far too many people were being made redundant for the new consumer industries to take them. Also the new skills needed to work in the consumer industries required retraining, a costly exercise for which the government was unwilling to pay. With the exception of the new aircraft and chemical industries, the factories of these newer light industries were much smaller and they employed a million fewer people. By the late 1930s the sale of British consumer goods only accounted for 15 per cent of the nation's total exports.

The Special Areas Act

In a further measure to attract industry to relocate to the most depressed areas, the government passed the Special Areas Act in 1934. The act identified South Wales, Tyneside, West Cumberland and Scotland as areas with special employment requirements, and invested in projects such as the new steelworks in Ebbw Vale.

The success of the act was limited because the level of investment – capped at £2 million – was not high enough; after two years of operation only 12,000 additional jobs had been created. The commissioner appointed by the government to administer the act, Sir Malcolm Stewart, admitted, 'generally speaking, we have failed.'

Opponents of the government in Parliament claimed that the special areas were simply a gesture – that it was important for the government to be seen to be doing something. Ironically, the unemployment figures in these special areas had witnessed a significant decrease by 1938, a fact which the government used to support the notion that its policies had been responsible for the improvement. However, the real cause of the drop in unemployment was due largely to the migration of workers to the more prosperous districts of the Midlands and the south-east of England.

Migration and emigration

For much of the nineteenth century, and up until the beginning of the Great War in 1914, Wales had attracted thousands of immigrants. However, the post-war depression of the 1920s and the Great Depression of the 1930s reduced the flow of immigrants to a trickle. Within a few short years pre-war immigration had turned into post-war migration on a massive scale. The reasons for this are not hard to understand. Unemployment in Wales and the north-east of England was widespread, long-lasting and severe. Unlike the north-east of England, Wales experienced massive levels of outmigration during the 1920s and 1930s. It has been estimated that 440,000 people left Wales between 1921 and 1938. The majority, some 85 per cent, left the south Wales valleys of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire. To take one example, by 1933 a quarter of the population of Pembroke Dock, some 3,500 people, had migrated, leaving a town in which (by 1937) 55 per cent were listed as unemployed.

During the 1920s and 1930s a large number of Welsh and northern English people left Britain altogether. For many of them, the United States of America was seen as a land of opportunity. It had glittering cities such as New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco;

it had Hollywood and jazz, but more importantly it had work. In one American town, a large number of ex-Tredegar folk successfully established its own Welsh community. Still more Welsh émigrés sought work in Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

For those who did not wish to leave Britain, the only alternative was to seek work in the prosperous regions of England. Thousands of Welsh workers and their families were encouraged to leave Wales by the government. The Ministry of Labour set up a scheme to help unemployed workers willing to move to popular destinations such as London, Coventry, Watford, Slough and Oxford. There, they were employed in light engineering and car manufacturing. One of the biggest employers of Welsh workers was the Morris motor car company at Cowley in Oxford.

The migration of so many people from Wales to England had serious consequences for some parts of the country. The population of the Rhondda fell 13 per cent in the 1920s and possibly by as much as 18 per cent in the 1930s, so that by 1951 there were around 111,000 compared to the 162,000 of twenty years earlier. Merthyr Tydfil too suffered a sharp decline in its population with around 26,600 people leaving the town between 1921 and 1939. Hartlepool and Gateshead in the north-east of England also suffered significant losses in population due to migration. Here over 20 per cent of the population moved south in search of work.

In Wales, the migration and emigration of such large numbers of people had an effect on the Welsh language and culture. According to historian, Deian Hopkin, in his article, 'Social Reactions to Economic Change' (published in 1988):

> An indication of demographic change is revealed by the statistics for the Welsh language. The number of monoglot Welsh speakers dropped dramatically from 155,000 in 1921 to 97,000 by 1931, and probably to no more than 60,000 by 1939. But it was the decline in Welsh speakers as a whole that was most serious; by 1931 the downward trend had begun and accelerated throughout the period. Much of the decline arose because a substantial sector of the population was fleeing.[14]

Old and new: were there two Britains?

According to the historian Bryn O'Callaghan:

> There were really two Britains in the 1930s.
> There was the Britain which depended for its living on the old, staple industries such as coal and shipbuilding.
> The other Britain was built on new industries making new products – motor vehicles, electrical goods, man-made fibres.[15]

If it was not for the severity of the Depression in the north-east of England, this description might almost serve as a useful comparison between a depressed Wales and a prosperous England. Certainly, the prosperous south-east of England was a world away from depressed

[14] Deian Hopkin, 'Social Reactions to Economic Change', in Jones and Herbert (eds.), *Wales between the Wars* (Cardiff, 1988).
[15] Bryn O'Callaghan, *A History of the Twentieth Century* (London, 1987).

south-east Wales. New investment, new housing, better roads and efficient rail transport transformed London and the surrounding Home Counties. Businessmen and industrialists found it cheaper and easier to set up a factory in somewhere like Slough than in somewhere like Merthyr Tydfil. Slough had better road and rail links and it was nearer London, a city of nearly 6 million people. London and the densely populated south-east could provide a skilled workforce and a ready market for buying goods. 80 per cent of the new factories built and 65 per cent of the new jobs created between 1931 and 1937 were located in London and the south-east of England. There was little outward sign of poverty in these areas.

In fact, it was in these areas that the building boom occurred which, according to historian A. J. P. Taylor, 'was the outstanding cause of the recovery of the thirties.' Indeed, Neville Chamberlain, a government minister, said in 1935, 'Broadly speaking, we may say that we have recovered in this country 80 per cent of our prosperity.' To speak of an economic recovery in the 1930s might appear premature if not insensitive especially for the thousands of unemployed living in the so-called special areas, but the fact is that between 1932 and 1935 some three million houses had been built and nearly a quarter of a million slum houses had been demolished. This activity accounted for over 30 per cent of the increase in employment by 1939. However, it must be remembered that this economic boom and the jobs it created was mainly concentrated in the south-east of England and the Midlands.

Source E: Slum housing in 1930s Britain.

Indeed, Kenneth O. Morgan has been rather critical of some of his fellow historians who make much of this economic revival and the prosperity which it brought. In his book, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880–1980*, he states the following:

> Some historians of late have tended to paint a more cheerful picture of the thirties than once used to be prevalent. No doubt, amongst the owner-occupiers of London, the home counties, and the east Midlands, with their cars, their housing estates, their thriving new light industries based on consumer durables, hire purchase and the newer technologies, the thirties were not such a bad time in which to live. But in south Wales, this verdict cannot possibly be accepted. The thirties there were a time when a whole society was crucified by mass unemployment and near-starvation.[16]

The north of England had more in common with south Wales than with southern England. Both regions were suffering high unemployment and economic decline. To reiterate, when the government did nothing to prevent the closure of the shipyards in the north-east of England, 75 per cent of Jarrow's workers became unemployed. In an effort to meet the Prime Minister, 200 of them marched the 300 miles to London. Newsreel cameramen and press photographers marched with them and recorded every day of the fourteen day trek south. Along the route the marchers were blessed in a service in Ripon Cathedral, they were joined by politicians such as Helen Wilkinson, the Labour MP for Jarrow, and they had their boots mended free of charge by the Leicester Co-op. They marched to the sound of mouth organs and they were fed and sheltered by sympathisers along the way.

This was perhaps the most famous protest march of the 1930s, but it achieved little or nothing. Unfortunately for the shipbuilders of Jarrow and the coalminers of the Rhondda, the power to cure unemployment lay with the politicians who sat in a Parliament situated in the prosperous London borough of Westminster. The contrast between poverty and prosperity was evident in Wales. There might have been a housing shortage in Pontypridd or slum housing in Merthyr during the thirties, but in the Uplands in Swansea, in Cyncoed and Roath in Cardiff and in the Garden Village in Wrexham, hundreds of private houses were built for a prosperous middle class. Unemployment in the Rhondda and Rhymney valleys was nearly four times that of Cardiff. Even new industries like the chemical industry opened new plants on Tyneside in the north-east of England and in north Wales. However, it was not until the late 1930s that the shadow of unemployment lifted from Britain, due largely to government investment in rearmament.

[16] Kenneth O. Morgan, *Rebirth of a Nation: Wales 1880-1980* (Cardiff, 1981).

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