



## The Workers' Institute in the 1930s



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Originally built in Cradley Heath in 1912, the Workers' Institute was rebuilt on the Museum site 2008. It was decided to present the building as it would have been in 1935.

By the 1930s the Institute had become what Mary Macarthur had hoped for when proposing that it be built; a centre for social activity and education, and a place where workers could seek help and guidance.

Two unions were based at the Institute; the Cradley Heath branch of the National Federation of Women Workers (N.F.W.W.), later part of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers (N.U.G.M.W.), and the Chainmakers' and Strikers' Association (C.M.S.A.).

The union office was a very busy one, dealing with everyday administration of the unions; collection of union subscriptions; payments of union benefits including sickness and unemployment, strike pay and funeral benefits; advice on employment issues and grievance procedures. In addition, both unions had been accepted as Approved Societies for administering the National Insurance Act of 1911. Factory secretaries collected completed insurance cards and handed them in at the Institute to be recorded and forwarded to the Ministry, which in turn credited each Approved Society with the value of the stamps on the cards. The Societies were responsible for the management of the funds, the calculation and payment of State benefits and for dealing with the many hundreds of queries that arose.

The Netherton Pictureland Company rented the Institute's auditorium from 1915. Open six days a week, it was the only cinema in Cradley Heath at the time. It closed in 1933, however, unable to compete with the luxurious surroundings and 'talkies' offered by the newly built Majestic Cinema. Between 1935 and 1956 it was used as a snooker hall, whilst above in the committee room, between 1939 and 1944, adults and children were taking dancing lessons with the Edna Homer Dance Academy.

Offices and rooms were available for rent and were used for a wide variety of activities, from social evenings, wedding receptions and yo-yo competitions to political meetings and lectures organised by the Workers' Educational Association.

## **Background to the period**

The period between the wars was one of contrasts; mass unemployment, dole queues, hunger marches and the means test; on the other hand it was a time of higher wages for those lucky enough to have jobs, a boom in housing, a rapid increase in car ownership and the availability of cheaper consumer goods. To a large extent, an individual's experience during the period depended on who they were, where they lived and what their occupation was.

## **The Economy**

In 1935 Britain was just coming out of a severe depression. There had been a dramatic decline in the traditional industries of coalmining, shipbuilding, steel and textiles, and in the industries supplying them, such as Cradley Heath's chain-making industry, which supplied the navy and commercial shipping with heavy chain.

Many new industries were set in the Midlands. One example is the Revo Electric Company in Tipton. The new industries offered well-paid work for many, but levels of unemployment were still high. In 1931 unemployment in Dudley peaked at 38.8%. Cradley Heath was badly hit, at 36.3%. Other Black Country towns suffered unemployment rates of over 30%. By 1934 levels had fallen. In Dudley, for example, it was 20.8%, but large numbers were still suffering the humiliation of means-tested benefits.

The Means Test was still operating in 1935. Unemployed workers, who had exhausted their 26 weeks of benefit, had to answer searching and personal questions in an attempt to qualify for assistance. Inspectors regularly visited the homes of claimants to check whether they had any other form of income, or any goods that might be sold.

## **Politics**

The National Government, a coalition of various parties, was in power in 1935. Stanley Baldwin became Prime Minister in June 1935, taking over from Ramsay MacDonald.

Some people in Britain reacted to the Depression by supporting extremist groups. On the extreme left wing was the Communist Party of Great Britain (C.P.G.B.), and on the far right, Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (B.U.F.).

Moseley saw himself as a second Mussolini, and by early 1934 had recruited 50,000 members to his newly named British Union of Fascists (B.U.F.), but it did not pose a serious challenge to the government. By 1935, support for the B.U.F. was declining and there was widespread anti-fascist feeling throughout the country.

Communism appealed to many working-class men and middle-class intellectuals, although it had limited success in the country as a whole. Nevertheless, the Communists were at the forefront of campaigns in support of the unemployed and against the Means Test. The communist-inspired National Unemployed Workers' Movement sought to raise the profile of the unemployment issue through hunger marches, factory raids to protest against overtime working and mass demonstrations aimed in particular at Poor Law Guardians.

Despite the activities of extremist political groups, the National Government continued to enjoy the support of the majority of the British public throughout the 1930s.

## **Appeasement**

There was still widespread belief in 1935 that the best way to deal with Germany's demands, and secure peace, was to compromise with Hitler, to 'appease' him. It was a belief shared with other western democracies, at the time. One world war had been enough. Pacifists put their hopes for peace in the League of Nations, an organisation set up specifically to broker bloodless resolutions to international conflicts. A national "peace ballot", in 1934 and 1935, supported by the TUC and Labour Party gave ordinary people the opportunity to express their views. It was signed by over eleven and a half million, the vast majority of whom stated that they endorsed the League of Nations and the quest for peace. Over ten million believed that if a nation insisted on attacking another, the other nations should combine to compel it to stop by economic and non-military measures. Six million expressed the view that, if necessary, military measures should be used.

## **Housing**

It was during the 1920s that the first generation of council homes were built. Initially, only the better off were offered the opportunity to move into them, as Corporations were anxious to attract only reliable and respectable tenants. Many people continued to rent from private landlords. Rents were generally between 8s and 10s per week.

The 1930s saw more slums cleared than ever before. Local authorities built hundreds of thousands of houses. Most were built on huge estates on the fringes of main towns and cities. In and around Birmingham there were 31 such estates by 1935.

The rate of private building also speeded up as costs fell and 90% mortgages became available. A typical 'semi' could be bought for as little as £450, about twice the annual salary of an average professional man.

New homes were built with an electricity supply, and many older properties were being converted to electricity. The cost of appliances fell in the 1930s as the British electrical industry expanded. The new hire purchase system brought them within the reach of the majority of the population, as the cost could be spread over a long period, although the adoption of electrical appliances was largely confined to radios, vacuum cleaners and laundry irons. The take up of electric cookers, fridges and washing machines came much later.

Salesmen, selling domestic electrical appliances door-to-door, were quite a common sight. Electrical goods could also be bought in local bicycle, hardware and ironmongery stores, the new department stores and local electricity board showrooms.

## **Food and shopping**

Eating habits in Britain were still conservative. Most people expected a meal of meat, potatoes and vegetables each day. Some tropical fruits were being imported by the end of the period, but vegetables such as peppers, courgettes and aubergines were rare and considered to be very exotic. Eating out was an occasional treat for some families.

The grand restaurants in Britain were well beyond the means of ordinary people, but the opening of Lyon's Corner Houses made it possible to eat inexpensive meals, in quite splendid surroundings, served by "nippies", waitresses smartly dressed in black dresses with white caps and aprons.

Stores such as Sainsbury, WH Smith, Dewhurst and Marks and Spencer were becoming familiar features on high streets, as was Woolworth's, whose British slogan was 'Nothing over sixpence!' For the first time, shopping trips to city centres were becoming a leisure activity.

United Dairies made milk deliveries twice a day in horse-drawn carts. Sliced bread was still quite a novelty. Breakfast cereals were becoming popular. Demand was growing for Cornflakes, Rice Krispies and Puffed Wheat. Cadbury's major launch in the 1930s was Bourn-Vita, 'the goodnight drink that becomes tomorrow's energy.' Cadbury's Whole Nut chocolate arrived in 1933, as did Rowntrees' Black Magic chocolates. Cadbury's Aero and Milky Way followed in 1935.

In the 1930s a wide range of cigarette brands were on sale. Many contained cards that were avidly collected by adults and children. Smoking was widespread and more and more women were taking it up. Cigarette advertisements announced that their products were harmless, or positively beneficial.

### **Health and Hygiene**

Major killer diseases such as tuberculosis, typhoid and pneumonia were, if not eliminated, at least beginning to be under control. Overall the 1930s saw a steady improvement in the health of the population.

There was a growing understanding of the importance of vitamins, proteins and minerals in the diet. At the time, the Government was not very active in trying to improve health through diet, but from 1934 about half the children in schools were receiving one third of a pint of milk, either free or at low cost. (In 1935 there was free, compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14.)

Underlying a surge of enthusiasm for rambling, or hiking, was the awareness that exercise played an important part in staying healthy. The Youth Hostel Association was formed in 1930.

There was a growing awareness of bodily and oral hygiene. More people could afford the new toilet soaps, and growing competition between manufacturers brought prices down. A bar of soap costing 4½d in 1930 had dropped to 3d in 1935.

Before the 1930s families were large, infant mortality was high and many women either died in childbirth or from self-induced abortions. Marie Stopes, and women like her, were pioneers of birth control, even though they faced prosecution under the Obscenities Act. After years of campaigning, the Government recognised the need for change and the Ministry of Health issued a circular to clinics allowing them to provide birth control advice to married women whose health would be endangered by further pregnancies. Opposition from the Church was still fierce.

## Leisure

In the 1930s there was a great emphasis on leisure activities, both in the home and away from home. The great novelty in home entertainment was the wireless. By the 1930s the newer word, 'radio' had been adopted. Almost every home had one, often bought on hire purchase. Even the poorest seemed to regard a radio as something of a necessity. The BBC provided a programme of news, drama, talks, religion and Children's Hour, but most of all music. Popular music was dominated by the 'big band' sounds of Jack Hylton and Henry Hall.

The other great innovation in public entertainment was the advent of the 'talkies' in 1927. By 1930 there were 5,000 cinemas in Britain. The new cinemas, with their soft seats, carpeting and bright, modern décor, were much more comfortable than many people's homes. Millions of people were visiting the cinema every week. Seats were cheap at 6d. Popcorn and ice creams were sold, and smoking was allowed throughout the performances. Films were often viewed through a haze of smoke.

Clark Gable came to represent the essence of masculinity. Errol Flynn was the swashbuckling sex symbol of the 1930s, and was given the lead in *Captain Blood* (1935). Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were making musical films at this time, including 'The Gay Divorcee' (1934) and 'Top Hat' (1935). Other films released in 1935 include; 'Bride of Frankenstein', 'Mutiny on the Bounty', 'A Tale of Two Cities' and 'The Thirty Nine Steps'. Gracie Fields made her film debut in 1931. She was already a famous music-hall artist and recording star. 'Sing As We Go' (1934) was one of her most popular films.

In spite of the popularity of the radio and cinema, reading at home continued to be popular. Libraries more than doubled their issues in the 1930s. Many new magazines were published. *Woman's Own* made its debut in 1932. In 1935 Penguin Paperbacks went on sale for the first time at a cost of 6d per book.

Dance halls and jazz clubs were still very popular forms of entertainment, and in the Black Country, fishing and pigeon, whippet and greyhound racing were popular hobbies.

Local authorities provided plenty of sports facilities, football pitches, cricket pitches, tennis courts, putting greens, bowling greens, and boating pools. Cricket, football and rugby were underpinned at a local level by a host of club teams and minor leagues. Cradley Heath had two football teams, the Early Closers and Saint Luke's, a bowling club and a tennis and hockey club

Spectator sports continued to draw big crowds. Football was easily the most popular sport, and from it developed a new form of betting in the shape of the football pools. Alex James of Arsenal, and Dixie Dean of Everton, became household names. At the time professional football players were paid little more than a skilled man. Cricket was also enjoying a 'golden age'. Jack Hobbs, Herbert Sutcliffe, and Len Hutton were amongst England's cricketing heroes, while Australia's Don Bradman was recognised as perhaps the best cricketer of the age.

Car production between 1930 and 1935 more than doubled, providing the middle classes, for the most part, with a new form of excursion. The ownership of motorcycles was common among the working classes, and charabancs, and later motor coaches, now competed with railways in organized trips to the countryside or the seaside. The Highway Code appeared in 1931 and driving tests became compulsory in 1934. An urban speed limit of 30 mph was also introduced in 1934, and in 1935 'cat's eyes' were laid along the middle of roads to make night driving safer.

During the period, more people were given paid holidays and many spent their holiday away from home. In Britain, more than 20 million visitors a year were going to seaside resorts. Blackpool, with its famous "illuminations" was a particular favourite.

### **Royalty**

King George V made economies in the royal family's lifestyle to reflect the nation's hardship in the 1930s. The King made his first Christmas radio broadcast to the Empire in 1932, an occasion which became an annual event. In 1935, the Silver Jubilee of his accession to the throne (6<sup>th</sup> May 1910) was celebrated with church bells ringing, fireworks and street parties throughout the country. Souvenirs of this much-loved monarch's 25-year reign were on sale everywhere.

King George was not a well man in 1935. He was suffering debilitating attacks of bronchitis.

The two princesses, Elizabeth born in 1926, and Margaret born in 1930, became darlings of the nation.

During 1934 a close relationship was developing between the Prince of Wales and Mrs Simpson.