

Paul Harding - Remembering The 50s and 60s



Paul Harding

Paul, a popular *Guest Speaker* at the *History Group*, gave a humorous introduction to his talk and advised the group to expect reminiscences. True to his prediction, throughout the talk there were murmurs of assent, nodding heads and nostalgic smiles.

Paul began by setting the scene: 1945 and post-war Britain. The United Kingdom was 'skint'; major industrial cities such as Coventry, Birmingham and Plymouth had been heavily bombed; there was austerity, rationing and other restrictions; fuel rationing; a 'make do and mend' attitude; and the country was re-imbursing the USA for their contribution to the War Effort.

Paul continued by comparing the end of the *Great War* (1914 - 1918) to the end of the *Second World War* (1939 - 1945). After the *Great War* the enemy, (Germany), was vilified, which to a large extent contributed to the rise of Fascism and the outbreak of the *Second World War*. In 1945 the attitude was reversed, and there was an effort (financial and otherwise) to help the vanquished aggressors get back on their feet.

1959 - 1962 was considered the epitome of the 50s and 60s. These times were birthed from two significant events:

- 1) The *Festival of Britain* (1951). This harked back to the *Great Exhibition* of the Victorian era and gave the message: 'Britain is a producing country' again. It was good for the economy and good for business. A lot of the group remembered the *Festival of Britain* and had visited it.
- 2) The *Coronation* (1953). Paul compared the reign of *Queen Elizabeth I* to that of *Queen Elizabeth II*. The first Elizabeth's reign was a time of prosperity, and the *Coronation* of the second Elizabeth was inaugurating a new prosperous Elizabethan era.

The late 1950s to the early 1960s was an era of **consumables**, with lots of advertising. Paul showed the group some contemporary advertising, which was strongly sexist, and compared it to our more politically correct attitudes today.

A popular topic was **television**. Many of the group remembered the small screens, limited channels and transmission times and 'grainy' pictures. Many families bought a television specifically to watch the Coronation live. TV aerials were seen on many roof tops.

The shortage of **housing** was another topic that the group remembered. There was mention of 'pre-fabs', modernisation (indoor bathrooms!), new kitchen technology and kitchen equipment.

Shopping changed too. After food rationing ended, self-service supermarkets began to appear. Paul showed the group a contemporary Sainsbury's leaflet, explaining to the housewife how to 'self-serve'. Coupons for 'money-off' household products were introduced, the Co-op issued 'dividends' and Green Shield stamps became familiar. These were the predecessors and equivalent of what is now known as 'Store Loyalty' cards.

The **health** of the nation improved during the 50s and 60s. The National Health Service had been founded in 1948, free milk was issued to children at school in glass bottles, cod liver oil was given to infants and children, as was orange juice. Britain was building a future of strong children.

Education took on a new role with the introduction of the '11+'. Paul reminded the group of dipping pens and inkwells, of fountain pens and ink bottles. He spoke about mental arithmetic', of 'times tables', and of the Tables on the back covers of exercise books.

Toys had until this time usually been made of wood. Now an exciting new material was being used - plastic! Tin, too, was used in the manufacture of toys.

Children's **books** were also part of this thrilling new post-war world. Ladybird books informed, educated and entertained; annuals were published and 'I-Spy' books challenged children to be observant.

Sci-fi was an absorbing interest. In fact, many of the 'predictions' of that era came true, despite the improbability of them happening. For example - at the end of the 60s men did land on the moon. And nowadays we have space stations orbiting the Earth and probes exploring Mars.

In the late 50s into the early 60s a new demographic appeared - the '**teenager**'. Until this time children were children until they went to work, sometimes as early as the age of 14. They rapidly became adults.

Paul's talk was slightly risqué at times and he frequently alluded to his newly married status. The talk was humorous throughout and there was a lot of laughter and nodding of heads. In summary, the afternoon had stirred quite a few memories, made us laugh and been a wonderful afternoon.

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