
Jarrow Marches Depression Experience

It is an obvious statement to make that not all experiences of the Depression were the same. The 1930's are usually seen as a time of great suffering and poverty. In fact, an overview of the time in terms of economics shows a time of relative prosperity and this is especially true when compared to other nations such as the USA and Germany, who for a time suffered much greater problems than Britain did.

The first image that springs to most people's minds when they think of the Depression is the Jarrow marches. Jarrow is a useful case study. The town, which now lies in the county of Tyne and Wear was predominantly a shipping area before 1929. The Wall Street crash caused a ripple effect all over the world, and it eventually hit Jarrow. In her book "The Town That Was Murdered" Ellen Wilkinson tells of one of the main shipyards Palmer's and its closure. She puts forward the idea that it was "Financial weakness not technical inefficiency" that caused the closure of Palmer's. The closure caused 8000 redundancies! This area of the north suffered huge poverty, resulting in the march. It was a demand for something to be done by the government.

The north was not the only place that saw social issues develop as a result of the Depression. In London, out of work Welshmen were seen in the streets entertaining Londoners in order to make ends meet. On the whole there was a clear increase in the amount of begging and the level of crime in the major cities. The men that were unemployed were often employed for a long time. This caused a different problem. Many firms, even when they were recovering, would ideally not want to employ a man who had been out of work for more than a year. The men are likely to be less efficient as they will not be up to date with recent techniques.

Although unemployment was a major headache for the government there were many significant improvements to the quality of life of the nation. In the south there had been an influx of new industries, such as the introduction of the wireless (the BBC was created in 1922). The practice of mass production had also come across the Atlantic and car manufacture was growing rapidly (it was the best in Europe). There was also an increase in the electrical engineering market, which was aided by the formation of the National Grid. In terms of the social life of Britain, the cinema was a new, popular attraction (in Liverpool, it was so cheap even unemployed people could afford to go!) and theatres had a resurgence in numbers of ticket sales. New buildings were being built and they were not confined to the south, in Glasgow a 4000-seater theatre was constructed!

On the whole there was an improvement in the health of the nation. However in some areas

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infant mortality was poor, such as in Oldham where 10% of children died before they were three years old. Rowntree also calculated that 70% of unemployed families were under the poverty line and this led to malnutrition.

The north had been crippled by the collapse of the staple industries but the introduction of new industries in the south caused the overall economic picture to be quite positive. The growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was an impressive 2.1% on average. Unemployment was the major achilles heel. The level of unemployment was 22% in 1932! As most people had worked in one industry all their lives, it made their skills useless to other firms and this made re-employment even more difficult, especially for the older members of the workforce.

There were many signs of affluence, especially in the south and this gives the impression of a north/south divide. In the south there was a housing boom, showing that many families had a certain amount of disposable income.

On the whole the government policy was not overly helpful to the people of the working class. The school of thought at the time was a case of balancing budgets and not taking risks with high levels of state intervention. As tax revenues fell, so did the amount of money the government had to spend. They duly cut benefits and this had a negative multiplier effect that caused even more unemployment! This policy did aid the middle class, who found that low taxes allowed them to spend more money on goods.

At the time of the Depression there was a new political party in power. Labour had just been elected and it only their second spell in power. They were ineffective at solving the issues caused by the Depression. The National Government that followed Labour in 1931 adopted none too radical policies and therefore ignored the unusual ideas of John Maynard Keynes. Keynes saw that in a Depression the government should spend, in order to boost the economy. He believed that a budget deficit could be run, assuming that the benefits of taxes coming in due to increased profits and income tax revenues will eventually pay off any debts incurred in the short run. By today's standards, this is common practice and seems sensible, but in the 1930's this was something very different and the National Government did not want to risk disaster.

In conclusion there was a sort of north/south divide in Britain during the 1930's. This north/south divide appears to still remain today but it was definitely exaggerated after the Wall Street crash. The south was far more dynamic compared to the north, which was set in its ways and relied too heavily on the staple industries. The Depression was indirectly responsible for a great deal of upheaval in Europe (such as the rise of Hitler), in some ways Britain was very lucky. On the whole the economy was very sound and the lives of a large number of people were improving.

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