

A Potted History – The Lucky Generation

I define the 'Lucky Generation' as those of us born post World War II into a world that has seen changes in almost every aspect of our life, not seen before and maybe never to be seen again (at least not in a good way). I personally believe that we have had the best of it and every day I read the papers and only see standards going downhill and life getting more and more difficult. Is this the conclusion that every generation comes to about the past and the future? Maybe and perhaps I have finally become Victor Meldrew (grumpy old git), however, in this potted history I will endeavour to prove my point and demonstrate the truth of why I believe that my generation has been the 'Lucky Generation'.

I entered this world almost exactly 9 months after VE Day (8th May 1945) in February 1946 and we became known as the Baby Boomer Generation, i.e. those born between 1946 and 1964. I am now 74 and already have passed the '3 score years and ten' that generations past might have considered normal life expectancy.

My parents' generation had lived through extreme hardship including two world wars when so many died young, a lack of housing and no real aspirations of owning their own home, a cycle that is now repeating itself with the current younger generations, limited job opportunities and a scarcity of chances to better themselves through education. How many of our working class parents were able to go to university? In 1918, after the 1st World War, the school leaving age was raised from 12 to 14 and then again in 1922 to 15. When my mother reached this age she was told by her teacher that she was bright enough to go on to a higher school, however, this was not possible as firstly you had to pay for it and secondly like many others her parents demanded that she leave school and start to earn money to help support the family. In those days the only way to better yourself was some form of apprenticeship, an admirable system that has been neglected in recent years in the push for everyone to go to university regardless of the course studied or the post-degree job positions available.

So what happened in the decade or so after the war that changed it for the better for my generation?

Firstly and perhaps the most important of all, Clement Attlee became Prime Minister in 1945 and the next 6 years of his government saw many changes. Amongst these was the raising of the school leaving age to 16 and for education to be free for all. A free National Health Service was introduced which we have often taken for granted and perhaps only just realised its value when the coronavirus pandemic hit us earlier this year. Attlee was also responsible for nationalisation of much of the essential industries which after a devastating war was probably critical to rebuilding the country. I regard myself as middle of the road conservative but I admit that Attlee (labour) was the right man for the times when the war ended.



We saw the start of a massive house rebuilding programme and along with many others of my compatriots at school we lived in a council house which we moved to when I was 5. Before that, immediately after the war, we had lived in a prefab (inset left) that was the government's answer to lack of housing and meant to be short term but in fact the last of the

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prefabs in London were only demolished 2 years ago (2018). They were actually very well designed and built with basic services, a fridge, an oven, electric heating and well insulated walls (albeit using asbestos). My earliest memories are of our time in a prefab in Dunstan Road, Westgate.

We also saw the extensive re-education of our young and I was one of the early age groups to benefit from passing the 11-plus and getting to grammar school (Chatham House). I was in a class of 41 at Garlinge Primary School and we were the first and only class where all 41 passed (never been done before or since) under the tutelage of our newly qualified teacher



Mr Cleminson (2nd right above). This was such an outstanding achievement that we will forever be referred to as the Class of '57 (that's me circled right).



The 50's, was also a period of global unrest with the start of the cold war, the war in Korea and the problems in Ireland but this was mostly a worry for our parents and only had a limited impact on my generation as we were too young to be called up for National Service which ended in 1960 when I was only 14. I had a friend who was called up and as his name began with M he was sent for a cushy posting in Germany; anyone with a surname from A to L was sent to Korea, just luck of the draw I guess. Also we had such new things as TV and programmes like The Lone Ranger, Rawhide, 77 Sunset Strip and Bonanza to take us away from the real world outside.

I spent my teenage years in the 60's and what an exciting time this was. The changes, innovations and events that took place during the 60's are like nothing else in history and may never be seen again. In this potted history it is difficult to capture the excitement of these times or to show how much the modern world has changed because of what happened then.

I will start with the music. Where would we be if there had not been the Beatles, Rolling Stones, The Who and Elvis Pressley amongst so many? I was into Bob Dylan at the time and can still remember singing **The Times they are a 'Changing** to my parents; I thought I was so modern and with it. We could buy records and watch the artists live on BBC TV on Top of the Pops. The music of the 60's is still with us now and being played on radios and players in almost everyone's house and car. The music of this time forms the basis of almost everything we listen to now. What started out as Rock and Roll with Bill Haley and Elvis in the 50's exploded into popular music in the 60's with British groups like the Beatles storming the UK and US charts. I remember seeing the Beatles live at the Winter Gardens, Margate in July 1963 when I was just 17 and the Who at Dreamland when they smashed up their instruments on conclusion of their act. I could never quite get my head round this expensive and, as I saw it, rather senseless act.

I remember the battle between Mods and Rockers on Margate beach (Whitsun weekend of the 16-



18 May 1964) when there was a running battle between Rockers with their greasy hair and motorbikes and the Mods in their parkers and riding scooters covered with chrome lights and flags (no helmets in those days!). I was 18 at the time but thankfully not involved although I did see myself as a mod



complete with haircut and Vespa scooter. Two Tribes went to War as the BBC later called it and

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with 3 of those arrested receiving prison sentences, Dr. George Simpson, Chairman of The Bench, described them as 'long-haired, mentally unstable, petty little sawdust Caesars who seem to find courage like rats by hunting in packs'....aah the memories!

What started in the 50's and became even more important in the 60's is that teenagers were suddenly not children any more but an important section of society when politicians and others realized teenagers would very quickly become voters and consumers. The new generation of pop stars, which started with Elvis in the 50's, were created whose main target audience was teenagers.

Another highlight of the 60's for an avid football fan and supporter of Spurs is that in 1961 Spurs were crowned First Division champions and FA Cup Winners. Two years later they beat Atletico Madrid 5-1 in the European Cup Winners Cup in Rotterdam. I have been a supporter ever since and regularly go to Spurs matches. In 1966, England, for the first and probably only time in our lifetime, won the World Cup, beating Germany 4-2 after extra time. Who will ever forget Ken Wolstenholme's commentary that has become



part of British popular culture, as Geoff Hurst scored England's fourth and decisive goal, "some people are on the pitch...they think it's all over....it is now!". And of course Germany will always believe the ball was NOT over the line but we could all see it was clearly over the line as the linesman and Swiss referee correctly ruled it a goal (who needs goal line technology?). The computer image (inset right) was created by Sky to prove that the ball definitely crossed the line. In anycase, the German second goal was 100% handball.



We were the first generation to own and drive cars in abundance as with the import of foreign makes, especially Japanese, and mass production brought the price down and made them affordable. However, it has to be said the quality was poor compared to modern cars. My first car, a 1961 Hillman Minx (inset left), was only 5 years old at the time but already it was falling apart. Undersealing had just started and galvanized bodies came in much later and the engine which had only done 30,000 miles required a reconditioned Gold Seal replacement. Nowadays, a 5 year car may have 60,000 miles or more on the

clock and still be 'as new'. Still it was a start and gave us so much more freedom than our parents had experienced at our age.

Cars and the advent of package holidays allowed our generation to see the world, which would not have been possible for our parents unless they were well off. Mine were not and I didn't experience flying until I was married in 1969 and went to Majorca for my honeymoon. I had a good job and was studying part time for a degree and in many ways had the best of both worlds getting qualifications and being paid for it. Unlike most of my era I stayed with one company all my working life (40 years) and whilst this may seem very unadventurous and lacking ambition to many, I thoroughly enjoyed the stability, reward and the job satisfaction that it gave me. An added benefit was to



retire with a final salary pension, never to be seen again and to have financial security in my later years, to the extent that we have travelled extensively and intend to do so until we can no longer physically manage it. In retirement I have learned to write HTML code and have built a website (inset above) around our travel experiences (www.mikeandjane.net).

The passing of the 60's saw the end of bachelor life and I entered the age of responsibility. The 70's brought the biggest slice of good fortune to those of us of my generation who had a decent job and were able to get a foot on the ladder and buy our first property. I was 24 at the time and managed to get a mortgage to buy my first house, a Wimpey, semi-detached, new build in St Peters for £4,950 which was around 3x my salary and with a 5% deposit was the basic requirement for a mortgage (happy days). For those of us who had bought our own house the 70's brought another great slice of luck as financial mismanagement by our Labour government resulted in massive inflation. By 1976, the Chancellor Dennis Healey had to apply to the IMF for a \$4 billion dollar loan, an enormous amount at that time, to get the country out of trouble. Within a few years, due to inflation, my salary had increased to more than twice what I had paid for my house and with payrises as high as 33% the mortgage became an insignificant outgoing. This enabled me to move to a larger house and set me on the road to where I am now. I think if you talk to most of the Baby Boomers they would have experienced similar good fortune.

The 60's and 70's saw the advent of space travel which would have seemed impossible to previous generations who had only just come to terms with mass travel by aeroplane. Space flights started with unmanned rockets and then one with a chimp (Ham on Jan. 31, 1961) followed



by Yuri Gagarin's first manned flight (April 12, 1961) and finally culminated in the first manned flight to the moon (July 20, 1969) in Apollo 11 with Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins. The immortal words of Neil Armstrong as he put his feet on the moon 'One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind' is probably one of the most famous one liners that will never be heard again in my lifetime.

When talking about the moon flights we tend to forget that there were actually six crewed missions to the moon that landed a total of 12 astronauts (all men) from 1969 to 1972 in a series of Apollo missions numbering up to Apollo 17. The excitement of the moon flights is really limited at this time to my generation as it seems unlikely that this will take place again for some time and maybe not in my lifetime. In spite of talk and promises the era of commercial space flights still seems a long way off.

The 60's was dominated for many by the war in Vietnam although this had little direct impact on our lives and although we lived through the Cold War, the nearest we came to war or total destruction in this nuclear age was the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. I don't think I ever thought this was going to affect my life in a negative way and in the end common sense prevailed as governments realised that nuclear war meant mutual destruction for everyone.

The 70's brought new inventions that heralded the age of technology including Intel's 4004 processor (1971), the Apple II computer (1977), MRI scanners (1977), the first genuine video game (Pong) played on an Atari 2600 (1977) as well as many more such as the Sony Walkman, the Epson MX-80 dot matrix printer, digital watches, VCR's and floppy discs. It was also the era of progressive rock music which started in the 60's with groups like the Moody Blues and really came alive in the 70's with Genesis, Pink Floyd, Marillion, Meat Loaf and others. This was and still



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is my era of music and I can remember vividly driving up the motorway at 125mph at 2am with the windows open and Bat Out Of Hell on full volume during my spell between marriages – sad but somehow nostalgic times.

What started in the 70's in terms of digital innovations really took off in the 80's with the first mobile phone (1983) and computers generally. It's hard to believe how we managed without mobile phones and that the first phone was the Motorola DynaTAC 8000X (inset right) costing an eye-watering \$4000 USD (nearly \$10,000 by today's standards) that weighed 790g and was 10 inches high, not including its flexible "rubber duck" antenna. It took 10 hours to charge and gave 30 minutes call time but nevertheless it was a massive status symbol to those who could afford it. We had to wait nearly 10 years before mobile handsets came into common use. From getting smaller and smaller, it now seems to me that they are getting bigger and bigger and no longer fit comfortably in my pocket which explains why I get complaints that I'm never with my phone.



The computer as we know it really came of age after the invention of the microprocessor and its development into a commercial product, initially by Intel. Now we cannot imagine a world without computers and marvel at the development of smaller and more powerful products, bearing in mind that a modern smart phone has more computer power than the original moon shot. Inventions and advancements in digital technology alone defines the age I have lived in more than anything else I think and it's all happened in the last 40-50 years.

From this point on, digitalisation of our working and everyday lives has simply got more complicated, more extreme, more automated to the point where many of the things we regarded as normal have all but disappeared. When did we last write a letter without the use of a word processor or more likely by texting on a phone using language that is not even good grammar, to the point where I noticed that my writing is nowhere as neat as it used to be and the younger generation cannot spell! How many of us read on tablets instead of books? If we want to listen to music at home we are most likely to ask Alexa; it never ceases to amaze me how this little device works so quickly and effectively but it is something we have grown accustomed to. Where is this technology going and how long before our homes and our lives are fully computerised which for many is already the case. I'm not sure if this is to be welcomed or is actually quite frightening. Having just lived through the boredom of lockdown brought on by the coronavirus pandemic I cannot imagine nor want a world where we have nothing to do because computers and robots do everything for us.

The 40 years from 1960 to the turn of the century is the time that my generation lived their working lives and so much has happened during this time that it is impossible in this potted history to capture the shear magic and complexity of it all. If we had a crystal ball is the next 50 years going to be any better. What changes are likely that may make as big a difference as those of the last 50 years?

Greater automation in our everyday lives at home and work will happen but is this likely to change our lives for the better, probably not. Cars will become electric and more environmentally friendly, although some would dispute this, but we already have very good cars that are well built, reliable and relatively inexpensive, especially compared to electric cars. We can at least travel from A to B knowing that there will be a refuelling station if the worst happens and we run out; how long before everyone can charge their car at home and not wait 2 hours in a garage during their journey

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because the battery has died? I guess the answer to this is the development of batteries that are more powerful and last longer between charges.

Computers will become more powerful and smaller but so what, my computer works as quickly as I can think and even now modern computers are not much faster or more powerful than they were 5-10 years ago. Music is definitely getting worse (in my opinion) and most people listen to music from years past anyway. Mobile phones are becoming more complex and able to do more but as phones how will they be better than what we have now.

I've lived through an age where there have been more changes that have affected our lives than ever before and whilst not all in a good way, there is no doubt that my generation is luckier than our parents or grandparents in all that is materialistic about the world we live in. It can justifiably be argued that this may not be the case in terms of spiritual reward but on balance we have not had to suffer the heartache and loss of life through wars and diseases as they have. We still have disease but medical research is continuing to conquer the really serious ones. We, the lucky generation have not had to fight in any wars unless you joined the army and fought in places such as Ireland or Afghanistan, in essence, our lives have been comfortable. We've benefitted from having more individual freedom than past generations, more opportunity to travel and see the world. The furthest my mother ever got to travel was a flight from Manston to Yugoslavia before the break-up of that country in 2003. Now, in retirement, my wife and I have travelled extensively and, thanks to a generous pension, will continue to do so if the virus allows us to.

Looking ahead I struggle to see how life will be better for future generations. Increasingly young people are unable to get on the housing ladder or are dependent on the parents for the money to do so. There are aspects of modern life I hate and from where I stand it's getting worse such as

- attempts to erase our history good or bad,
- the way older people are marginalised and disrespected after the sacrifices they have made,
- use of online social media to denigrate anyone who does not agree with their own views,
- the threat to democracy and free speech by the so-called 'woke' generation,
- attempts by extremists to threaten our way of life just because they have a different view.

I could probably get on my soap-box and list many more negatives about now and the future. However, I would much rather leave on a high note and say what a wonderful life that those of us born after the 2nd World War, the Lucky Generation, have had and leave you with an image of some of the best musicians of the 60's.

