

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-41911-6 — The Beatles in Context
Edited by Kenneth Womack
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PART I

Beatle People and Beatle Places

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CHAPTER I

*Britain at Mid-Century and the Rise
 of the Beatles*

Jude Southerland Kessler

The 1950s: life in Britain, for the last decade, had been austere and unsmiling. And in the post-war world, little had changed. In England, government debts had the country on the verge of economic ruin.¹ Furthermore, London, Liverpool, Birmingham – and all of the seaport villages – lay in scalded ruin. Children skittered about, slapdash, on heaps of rubble, and the once pastoral countryside was littered with abandoned military bases and equipment, quietly disappearing in a riot of weeds.

Beatles expert and author Mark Lewisohn offers this vivid 1956 description of Liverpool as viewed by author J. Brophy in his period piece, *City of Departures*: “Once progressive and proud, the city is now dilapidated and dirty, shabby and down and out . . . still [replete with] unrepaired bombsites, many transformed into eternal temporary car parks, red brick buildings now black with encrusted soot, ruined shops run amok with police-dodging barrow boys, people queuing for almost everything.”² From top to toe, England was ravaged.

Well into the 1950s, meat, butter, coal, and tea (*of all things!*) were still being rationed.³ The oft-repeated, sighed refrain of, “Before the war . . . before the war . . .” began every sentence.⁴ And to make strident measures even worse, the standard rate of income taxation was nine shillings in the pound – more than *double* today’s rate.⁵ Money was tight; belts were tighter. Life was grim.

In 1950, although England supplied one-quarter of the world’s trade in manufactures, and employment was at an all-time high, her people were

¹ Philip Norman, *Shout! The Beatles in Their Generation* (New York: MJF Books, 1981), 247.

² J. Brophy, *City of Departures*, 56, cited in Mark Lewisohn, *All These Years: Tune In* (London: Little Brown, 2013), 137.

³ Roland Quinalt, “Britain 1950,” *History Today*, 51, 4 (August 2001), 2.

⁴ Richard Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair: Sex, Class, and Power in the Age of Profumo* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013, Kindle edition), 1156.

⁵ Quinalt, “Britain 1950,” 2.

not thriving. More than half lived in rented housing – dreary bedsits with limited privacy and meager heater bars for comfort.⁶ And lethal levels of coal smog choked the cities; in 1952, over 4,000 people in London died from lung and heart disease.⁷

But life in urban Britain was “elegant” compared to the paltry standard of rural living. Farms lacked basic water sanitation, electricity, and telephones. Life in British countryside cottages hearkened starkly back to the previous century. Despite the Agriculture Act of 1947, which had boosted farm income by approving subsidies for those raising livestock or cereal grains, England’s farmers dwelt in dire poverty.⁸ The world “was waiting for the sunshine,” but it was yet to be found.

Across the nation, however, the stern mantra of “Keep calm and carry on” squelched any tendency to complain. Indeed, as author Richard Davenport-Hines observed, though drabness was the order of the day, “pinch and scrape suggested respectability.”⁹ Those who suffered were ennobled as moral and honorable.

Davenport-Hines goes on to say, “in 1957 [England] – dominated by the memory of two world wars – was more drilled and regimented than at any time in history, and more strictly regulated.”¹⁰ Indeed, “conformity in clothes, deportment, and opinions was the sign of trustworthiness.”¹¹ Audiences still, for example, stood respectfully for the National Anthem.¹² The British government dispensed consumption pricing; contraceptive devices were not given to the unmarried, and homosexuality was illegal.¹³ Conventionality reigned supreme.

But merely one decade later, life altered dramatically and irrevocably. In ten brief years, England hurtled into reformation. Evolution was radical and vast.

Davenport-Hines’s first youthful inclination that the world was swiftly changing occurred one late afternoon in the early 1960s when his father

⁶ Quinalt, “Britain 1950,” 3, and P. Willis-Pitts, *Liverpool: The Fifth Beatle* (Littleton, CO: Amozon Press, 2007), 109. Willis-Pitts describes his post-war home in Liverpool as “unheated save by a fire” with “six people living in a space big enough for two.” He says, “The outside toilet (the only one) stank, and there were rats in the alley.”

⁷ Quinalt, “Britain 1950,” 3. ⁸ Quinalt, “Britain 1950,” 4.

⁹ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 2435. ¹⁰ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 464.

¹¹ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 338.

¹² As late as 1964, Derek Taylor and Neil Aspinall would make good use of this custom, employing it after Beatles performances as an apt technique for getting the Beatles off stage and safely into escape cars.

¹³ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 464.

sped along London's Park Lane, a bright four-lane boulevard that had once been a sleepy dual carriageway. Observing his father's utter delight with the revamped roadway, Davenport-Hines concluded, "My father loved the swift, new Park Lane as a reminder that England was finished with slow coaches."¹⁴ The thoroughfare, Davenport-Hines concluded, was a brash symbol that the Old Guard had lost its iron grip.

Indeed, as actor Michael Caine declares in his documentary, *My Generation: Celebrate the 60s, The Decade That Changed the World*, "Britain in the 1950s was stable, conventional, predictable . . . and dull. But that's the way our parents liked it. My generation demanded new beginning."¹⁵

Cultural Change Initiates

No one is certain when the transformation began. Perhaps the shift started when England "abdicated its status as a Great Power," losing India (1947), Pakistan (1947), Burma (1948), and Ceylon (1948), and for the first time in history, the sun actually set on the British Empire.¹⁶ Or perhaps the change had roots in the Irish (1940) and Scottish (1950) unrest – desperate, heartfelt efforts to separate from England. Without a doubt, the fierce and unquenchable spirit of independence served as a pivot point in what was to come.¹⁷

Perhaps the kaleidoscopic shift from the world of the 1940s was further enhanced by the great influx of multi-cultural peoples to England's tiny island. The Irish had long since arrived in Liverpool, during the late 1840s.¹⁸ Mark Lewisohn tells us that "three hundred thousand sick and poor Irish landed in Liverpool in 1847 alone [during the Great Potato Famine] . . . such were the numbers of Irish pouring into Liverpool alone that records of arrival could not be kept."¹⁹ As he shrewdly observes, "The Irish . . . brought Ireland to Liverpool."²⁰

¹⁴ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 464.

¹⁵ David Batty, Ian La Frenais, Dick Clement, et al., *My Generation: Celebrate the 60s, The Decade That Changed the World*, film documentary, XIX Entertainment, London, 2017.

¹⁶ Jonathan Gould, *Can't Buy Me Love: The Beatles, Britain, and America* (New York, Harmony Books, 2007), 15.

¹⁷ This spirit of independence was, essentially, the "father" of George Harrison's bold retort to George Martin's critique of the Beatles' behavior: "Yeah well, I don't like your tie." See Kenneth Womack, *Maximum Volume: The Life of Beatles Producer George Martin, The Early Years* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2017), 94.

¹⁸ Lewisohn, *All These Years*, 16. ¹⁹ Lewisohn, *All These Years*, 16–17.

²⁰ Lewisohn, *All These Years*, 17.

But in the post-war 1950s, many others appeared on the scene: Caribbean West Indians, Africans, Dutch, Indians, and Greeks.²¹ Their rich language, dress, customs, attitudes, and music became inexorably woven into a lush, multi-textured garment that was the new Great Britain.

In Britain's larger cities, Chinese "take-aways," Indian restaurants offering exotic "kebabs," and splendidly diverse Caribbean steel bands gradually became as common as Sunday pot roast dinners. Ports of call, welcoming sailors from all over the world, introduced Britons to the sounds of America. The music of Buddy Holly, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Elvis Presley filtered into the once proper BBC Light Programme-dominated British world.²² The sounds of sentimental Celtic folk tunes, sensual syncopation, and live jive filtered out over England's rooftops; the music of the isle became rich, various, and diverse.

The times, they were indeed a-changing. Women – who in pre-war days, had been expected to marry, keep house, and raise a family – had taken jobs during World War II, and in the aftermath, many were reluctant to surrender the social and economic advantages of such employment. Wearing full, long skirts, nylons, and bright red lipstick, these newly autonomous young women began to reject the notion of being a "selfless housewife."²³ British women clung to their vocations, cherishing "the feeling of independence . . . an escape from what home [had] come to mean."²⁴ Female employees eagerly filed into the workplace, and on Saturday nights, single girls, in confidence-building groups, filled the local dance halls.²⁵

These inspired young women were after more than just a vocation, however. They were seeking recognition: validation of their worth. Because parliament tried to prevent them from serving in the political arena, females desired representation even more fervently. As early as 1918, with the Representation of the People Act, females over age 30 (*about 40 percent* of Britain's female population)²⁶ won the right to vote. That same year, they were permitted to stand as candidates and be selected as Members of Parliament.²⁷ In fact, Constance Markievicz won a seat in the House of Commons in 1918, but as an active and vocal member of Sinn Féin, she did

²¹ Willis-Pitts, *Liverpool: The Fifth Beatle*, 103.

²² Gary Popper, David Appleton, Dave Bedford, et al., *Looking for Lennon*, film documentary, Evolutionary Films, London, 2017.

²³ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 2025, and Quinalt, "Britain 1950," 7.

²⁴ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 1999. ²⁵ Quinalt, "Britain 1950," 9.

²⁶ "Women in Parliament," *Art in Parliament*, www.parliament.uk/worksofart/collection-highlights/portraits/women-in-parliament.

²⁷ Note: they were allowed to be elected to a seat in the House of Commons.

not take her seat, and the opportunity to introduce women into parliament passed. In 1919, however, Nancy Astor was elected as a Conservative for the Plymouth-Sutton constituency – a seat she held until 1945.²⁸

But such extremely scanty representation did not signify that women were accepted as a part of Britain's political life. Indeed, in 1957, Robert Shirley, 13th Earl Ferrers, stated quite candidly, "Frankly, I find women in politics *highly* distasteful . . . a man's judgement is generally more logical and less tempestuous . . . We like women; we admire them. Sometimes, we even grow fond of them, but we do not want them here!"²⁹ This prevailing attitude galvanized the suffrage movement in England, and by 1958 (via the Life Peerages Act), women finally secured the right to hold a seat in the House of Lords.³⁰

But elsewhere, little had changed. Because married women were forbidden by law to negotiate a legal contract or secure a loan without their husband's signature, they reacted with, "It's *his* house! It's *his* children!"³¹ Women sought something all their own; they sought expression, acknowledgment, and identification.

Young men were hungry for meaning as well. In a journey toward identity, some began sporting tight drainpipe jeans and long Edwardian-style jackets with velvet collars, hallmarks of the edgy Teddy Boy movement.³² And others found skiffle – an exceptional blend of American folk tunes, jazz, and primitive rock 'n' roll. Thirty thousand bands sprung up across the country: bare-bones ensembles comprising washboards, jugs, kazoos, tea-chest bass, harmonicas, and if very fortunate, a rare guitar or a banjo.³³

The groups popped up overnight, rehearsing in the myriad bomb shelters that dotted Britain's crumbled neighborhoods, and inspired by British skiffle star Lonnie Donegan,³⁴ they ginned out "Cumberland Gap"

²⁸ "Women in the House of Commons," *Parliament uk*, www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/elections/voting/womenvote/overview/womenincommons/, 'Women in Parliament', *Art in Parliament*, and "Lady Nancy Astor Biography," *Biography*, www.biographyonline.net/politicians/uk/lady-nancy-astor.html.

²⁹ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 1902–03. ³⁰ 'Women in Parliament', *Art in Parliament*.

³¹ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 1903.

³² Bill Harry, *The Ultimate Beatles Encyclopedia* (New York: Hyperion, 1992), 646. Both Stuart Sutcliffe and John Lennon dressed in the Ted style at Liverpool College of Art in 1958.

³³ Ken Womack, *The Beatles Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2 (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2014), 842–43.

³⁴ Harry, *The Ultimate Beatles Encyclopedia*, 203. Harry notes that Donegan "virtually created the skiffle phenomenon in England" beginning with his 1956 hit, "Rock Island Line." Harry says that after this entry song, Donegan had "ten Top Ten chart entries [in Britain] within an eighteen-month period."

and “Jack of Diamonds” (enhanced with the “ole ackey-dackey,” as Gerry Marsden explained in the documentary *The Compleat Beatles*)³⁵ at golf clubs, birthday parties, and wedding receptions.³⁶

Banned in stylish establishments, skiffle – and gradually its successor, rock ‘n’ roll – became the rugged voice of Britain’s male youth. Young men in the post-war world were happy to be alive and determined to be heard. Fortunately, the press (also eager for change) heard them. By the late 1950s, “youth” had become the watchword of once-conservative newspapers such as London’s *Daily Mirror*.

In August 1956, *Daily Mirror* reporter Patrick Doncaster penned the chilling article “Do We Want This Shockin’ Rockin’?” in which he asked fellow Britons: “Can it happen here – the trouble that goes with rock ‘n’ roll music in the United States?”³⁷ But merely a handful of months later, the *Mirror* tuned in to the wavelength of the young, proudly carrying the life story of Tommy Steele – England’s first rock ‘n’ roll teen idol.³⁸

Teenagers – who, one generation ago, had been conveniently “seen and not heard” – now were finding themselves in music, fashion, the press, and even on “the big screen.” In September 1956, as the American musical film *Rock Around the Clock* (starring rock ‘n’ roll DJ Alan Freed, along with Bill Haley and the Comets)³⁹ swept riotously from one theater to another across the British isle, the early stirrings of England’s vibrant Youth Movement⁴⁰ horrified their elders. Mark Lewisohn notes that at a Paddington (West London) showing of *Rock Around the Clock*, a 15-year-old boy “punched the cinema manager.”⁴¹ Up in Liverpool, duck ass-coifed, 16-year-old John Lennon, the founder and leader of the Quarry Men skiffle group, eagerly anticipated the film’s arrival on Merseyside as the perfect opportunity to flex his youthful independence and raise “a bit o’ ruckus.” But the ingénue guitarist was sadly disappointed when the local audience in Liverpool’s Woolton suburb sat mutely staring at the screen and munching on popcorn. “Nobody,” he complained forever after, “was screaming or dancing in the aisles. I was all set to tear up the seats, too, but nobody joined in.”⁴²

³⁵ Patrick Montgomery and Stephen Bennett, *The Compleat Beatles* (Los Angeles: MGM/UA, 1982).

³⁶ Harry, *The Ultimate Beatles Encyclopedia*, 688. Harry tells us that Nigel Whalley, who served as the first manager of the Quarry Men, got the group their first gig as a skiffle band at the Lee Park Golf Club – where he worked – in 1957. Harry (p. 540) also states that the Quarry Men, playing skiffle tunes such as “Rock Island Line,” “Railroad Bill,” “Cumberland Gap,” and “Freight Train,” also performed at “various parties” prior to their first “real gig” at the 22 June Roseberry Street carnival.

³⁷ Lewisohn, *All These Years*, 281. ³⁸ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 3426.

³⁹ Ray Coleman, *Lennon* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), 53.

⁴⁰ Willis-Pitts, *Liverpool: The Fifth Beatle*, 103. ⁴¹ Lewisohn, *All These Years*, 281.

⁴² Philip Norman, *John Lennon: The Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 78.

Lennon's bitter disillusionment aside, films such as *Blackboard Jungle*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, and *Rock Around the Clock* were all litmus tests – indicators of a new and fervent infatuation with youth that had only begun to populate. As respected journalist Ray Coleman noted, these films were much more than entertainment; they were “clarion calls to confrontation.”⁴³ And in 1956, the world was beginning to listen to that sound.

But this cultural metamorphosis was not restricted to teens alone. The British family was changing as well. As two-wage-earner families became the norm and the government supported two-week paid holidays for workers,⁴⁴ family travel took hold as an annual tradition. British “holiday camps” (such as Butlins) increased in popularity,⁴⁵ requiring proprietors to provide inexpensive entertainment. And nothing was more affordable than the eager, rabid-to-be-rich-and-famous skiffle and rock 'n' roll bands that had mushroomed across the nation. Enthusiastic groups such as Liverpool's Rory Storm and the Hurricanes could be had for the asking – with the promise of free caravan board, meals, and a paltry weekly rate.⁴⁶ It was an experience camp owners and families could afford.

But when unable to travel, the rapidly progressing field of technology was most happy to supply a new and unique diversion to Mum, Pater, and the kids.

Technological Change Augments

In 1963, English literary critic and author Cyril Connolly wrote: “Television is the single greatest factor for change in people's lives and probably has done much to undermine English Puritanism.”⁴⁷ Indeed, the pervasive “goggle box” – as it was referred to in Britain – was solely responsible for bringing lurid stories and photos straight into the family living room.⁴⁸ As author Richard Davenport-Hines observed, “Television abolished shame.”⁴⁹

⁴³ Coleman, *Lennon*, 54.

⁴⁴ Tim Lambert, “A Brief History of Holiday,” *Local Holidays*, 2019, www.localhistories.org/holidays.html. Two-week paid holidays were given after the first year of employment. It must be noted that seaside resorts and holiday camps had first appeared in the early 1900s when one-week vacations were instituted in the UK. With the two-week increase during the 1950s, their numbers and popularity spread.

⁴⁵ Quinalt, “Britain 1950,” 10.

⁴⁶ Harry, *The Ultimate Beatles Encyclopedia*, 560. The drummer for Rory Storm and the Hurricanes was Ringo Starr.

⁴⁷ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 3491.

⁴⁸ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 3491.

⁴⁹ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 3491.

In the early 1950s, radio and TV – under the auspices of the British Broadcasting Company (the BBC) – politely refrained from dealing with unsavory subjects. Programs were cultured and refined. But as television audiences grew from 764,000 in 1951 to over 4 million in 1955, entrepreneurial eyes turned longingly toward the industry.⁵⁰ With the passage of the Television Act of 1954, the BBC's monopoly over TV was shattered and the next year, a commercial station known as Independent Television (ITV) was created.

Whereas the BBC had always “spoken with a conservative voice,” the newly created, commercial ITV was determined to make money.⁵¹ And realizing that smart businesses would only purchase commercials during well-liked programs, ITV strove to give the people what they wanted. The popular program *Danger Man* (featuring Patrick McGoohan as secret agent, John Drake)⁵² and the beloved soap-opera *Coronation Street* premiered on ITV in 1960. Artfully appealing to public interests, ITV swiftly changed the landscape of the British television.

Indeed, with a jealous eye on ITV's ratings, the BBC began to reach out for public approval as well. From November 1962 to December 1963, the BBC courageously aired the wry political satire short *That Was the Week That Was*.⁵³ Irreverently poking fun at “the men in power,” *TW3* (as it was called) dared to laugh at those in the public eye.

This razor wit was also the biting humor of a rapidly rising band from Liverpool known across Britain in 1962–63, a group once known as the Quarry Men but now heralded as the Beatles. Their innovative music and sharp retorts were capturing the imaginations of young people and the press alike, and on November 4, 1963, the boys won the staid approval of the Royal Family when the group performed to resounding applause at the Royal Command Performance.⁵⁴

Politics Serves as Catalyst

Yet, none of these social, cultural, or technological changes held quite the impact on a society that British post-war politics wielded. The rise of the “working class” (correctly translated as “the lower class” in 1950s and 1960s

⁵⁰ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 3471. ⁵¹ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 3474.

⁵² “Patrick McGoohan,” *IMDb*, www.imdb.com/name/nm0001526/.

⁵³ Davenport-Hines, *An English Affair*, 3483.

⁵⁴ Norman, *John Lennon: The Life*, 330–31. Also known as “The Royal Variety Show.”