

YEAR THREE / SECTION THREE

SOCIAL CHANGE IN 20 CENTURY IRELAND

Social History is about how people live their lives – with work, leisure, housing and transport. This section is about how much people's lives, in these areas have changed since 1900.

Rural and Urban Life.

In 1900, 70% of Irish people lived in the countryside. Because these people had very different levels of income, their lifestyles varied a great deal.

- ❑ **Landlords** – Lived in big houses on large estates. Because they did not have to work for a living, they spent their time hunting and feasting.
- ❑ **Prosperous Farmers** – These had farms of 50 acres and over, lived in two story houses with slate roofs.
- ❑ **Smaller Farmers** – Had farms of less than 50 acres, lived in thatched cottages with an outside toilet.
- ❑ **Farm Labourers** – Had no land and earned their living working for farmers. Before 1914, most emigrants came from this class.

In rural Ireland living conditions were bad. There was no electricity, running water or toilets. Houses were damp and dark. Social life depended on gatherings in houses at night, where conversation, stories songs and dances took place. Children in a community sat together at these gatherings and did their homework.

In the 1950's things began to change as electricity was brought to homes as part of the **ESB's Rural Electrification Scheme**. Electric cookers replaced cooking over an open fire. Water was now pumped straight to homes and inside toilets became more common. Govt. built houses replaced the poorer dwellings of small farmers and farm labourers. But emigration remained a problem with large numbers of young people going to America or Britain.

In the 1960's as living standards continued to improve, employment rose and emigration began to drop off as young people stayed in Ireland to take the new jobs being created by the govt.'s Economic Plan.

In 1973 Ireland joined the EEC and farmers became better off. Houses became bigger and more modern. Socialising changed also as people stayed at home to watch T.V. The increasing use of cars meant a reduction in isolation and greater mobility.

Urban Life.

In 1900 only 30% of Irish people lived in towns and cities. Living conditions for the poor were among the worst in Europe. But the better off lived in comfortable conditions. The use of trains and trams saw cities expand. Suburbs for the wealthy developed, while the poor lived in the city centre.

- ❑ **Working Class** – Lived in tenement houses. These were divided into single room flats with no water or toilets. Whole families lived in them and disease like TB, Typhoid and Cholera were common.
- ❑ **Middle and Upper Classes** – Lived in spacious suburbs with large houses that had gardens and servants.

In the 1930's Local Authorities began to pull down these tenements and build better houses in new suburbs like Ballyfermot and Crumlin. These homes had five or six rooms, electricity, running water and toilets. This programme of building continued until the 1960's.

However the rise of problems with alcohol and drugs has led to increased pressure on the lives of people living in towns and cities.

Rural Work.

In 1900 most people worked on the land. As the farm was left to the eldest son the other children were forced to emigrate to find a way to make a living for themselves and their families. Most farms were less than 50 acres and worked by the family. On larger farms Labourers were employed.

Women looked after the house as well as certain farming duties such as milking cows and minding the hens/geese and ducks.

There were very few machines and hard manual labour was the norm. At busy times of the year farmers worked together to help each other.

Change came slowly. In the 1920's the Tractor began to replace the horse. Electricity brought power for milking machines and other farm machinery.

In 1973 Ireland joined the EEC and farmers got a better price for their produce. Farms became larger and machines more powerful. Fewer labourers were needed and thousands moved to towns and cities in search of work.

Urban Work.

In 1900 Belfast was the only industrialised city in Ireland with shipbuilding and heavy engineering. In other cities, trade and commerce dominated work.

- ❑ **Unskilled Labour** – These included Dockers and general labourers. There were more workers than there was work available, so wages were very low indeed, about €1.30 a week. The work was casual with workers being employed on a daily basis.
- ❑ **Skilled Labour** – These included Plumbers, Carpenters etc. They were better paid and had Trade Unions to defend their interests.

To make ends meet most working class woman had to work. Many worked as **Domestic Servants** in the houses of the better off. Wages averaged between €20.00 and €40.00 per year.

In the 1960's more and more factories were built and people found work in them.

There was also an increased demand for the **Service Industries** such as Banking, Law and Insurance. In the 1990's there was greater variety of jobs especially in the Computer Industry.

The Status of Women.

In 1900 women were treated as **second-class citizens** in the following ways,

- ❑ They could not vote.
- ❑ Their education was very limited as were their opportunities for education.
- ❑ They were expected to marry.
- ❑ Once married they were economically dependent on their husbands.

However there were changes occurring,

- ❑ Convent Secondary Schools began to offer girls the opportunity to continue their education and qualify for University.
- ❑ **Hanna-Sheehy-Skeffington** founded The **Irish Women's Franchise League** in 1908 to campaign for women to be given the vote.
- ❑ During WW I women were needed to work in the factories and other areas of business. This had a lasting change on how women were perceived and in 1918 when the war ended women were given the vote.
- ❑ Women played a significant role in the Independence Movement through **Cumann Na mBan**. **Countess Constance Markievicz** commanded a troop of volunteers during the 1916 Rising.

In the new Irish Free State, women continued to have a limited role. They were paid lower wages and had to leave certain jobs if they got married.

In the 1960's, things began to change as girls were given more educational opportunities. Ireland was being influenced by ideas from outside through films and television.

A Women's Movement demanded changes. In 1977 the **Employment Equality Act** made it illegal to discriminate against women in their jobs.

More women became involved in politics. **Mary Harney** was the first women leader of a political party in Ireland and the first woman to become Tanáiste. In 1990 **Mary Robinson** was elected first woman President.

Leisure and Entertainment.

In 1900, work took up so much time that there was little time for leisure. In rural areas entertainment was limited to the home and the local **GAA** club.

In towns and cities, there was a greater variety of activities, but still largely home based. **Daytrips** to the seaside became popular and of course soccer, rugby and GAA were widespread. Theatre and **Music Halls** were also popular.

In the 1930's **Cinema** became very popular with most people going at least once a week.

Radio began broadcasting in Ireland in 1926 but did not become widespread until the '40's and '50's.

In the 1960's cinema declined in popularity as TV became more widespread. Then, as today, Sports and Soap Operas drew large audiences. The most popular show was "**The Late Late Show**", hosted by **Gay Byrne**. It had a huge impact as it frequently discussed topics, which were taboo in Ireland.

Since the 1970's demand for entertainment has grown as people work a shorter week and have longer holidays.

The 1990's saw a revival in Cinema as large **Multiplexes** were built across the country.

Sport has also changed as soccer and athletics have attracted more attention due to the success of Irish men and Women involved in these sports, on the world stage.

These include the **Irish Soccer Team** under Jack Charlton and **Sonia O Sullivan**.

Transport.

In 1900, the **Horse and Cart** was the most common form of transport in Ireland. The **bicycle** was also becoming popular. Most people walked from place to place.

Long distance travel was done by **train**. In 1900 Ireland had more miles of railway track than it has today. In cities most travelled to work on **electric trams**. Only the very rich could afford cars.

From the 1920's cars, buses and lorries began to dominate transport. Many railways and tramlines closed down. Recently the **car** has become so popular that towns and cities cannot cope. Government is reopening tramlines and railway lines, while also building ring roads and bypasses.

Air-transport developed slowly in Ireland until recently. **Aer Lingus** was set up in 1936. The first flights to the US were by **Seaplane** from the River Shannon in the 1950's. In the 1960's **Boeing** developed the "707" and an airport was opened at **Shannon** to provide a refuelling stop for all jets from the US to Europe.

In recent years the cost of air travel has fallen sharply due to competition from low-cost airlines such as **Ryanair**. This has led to a situation where everyone can now afford to fly.

Communications.

In 1900 communication was slow and limited. It was mostly by letter or **Telegraph**. In 1902 **Marconi** invented the **Radio** and a station for sending messages across the Atlantic was built at Clifden in Co. Galway. For some years this was the only means that Europeans had of sending messages to America.

Telephones were not widely used because of the expense.

Newspapers such as "The Irish Times" were the main source of news.

In the 1930's "Newsreels" were shown weekly in Cinemas and this was the main source of International News for Irish people.

Modern communications have become faster and more accessible to all – the Internet, E-Mail, Fax, Phone can give instant personal communication on an international scale.

Modern Irish newspapers have traditionally certain political lines. "The Irish Press" a daily paper until it closed in the 1990's was a supporter of Fianna Fáil, while "The Independent" supported Fine Gael.

Ireland is now part of the "Global Village" with Irish people in constant touch with every corner of the world.

Sources' used include; "Door to the Past" R.Quinn & D O Leary, Folens 2002 and "Focus on the Past", G.Brockie & R Walsh Gill & McMillan 1997.