

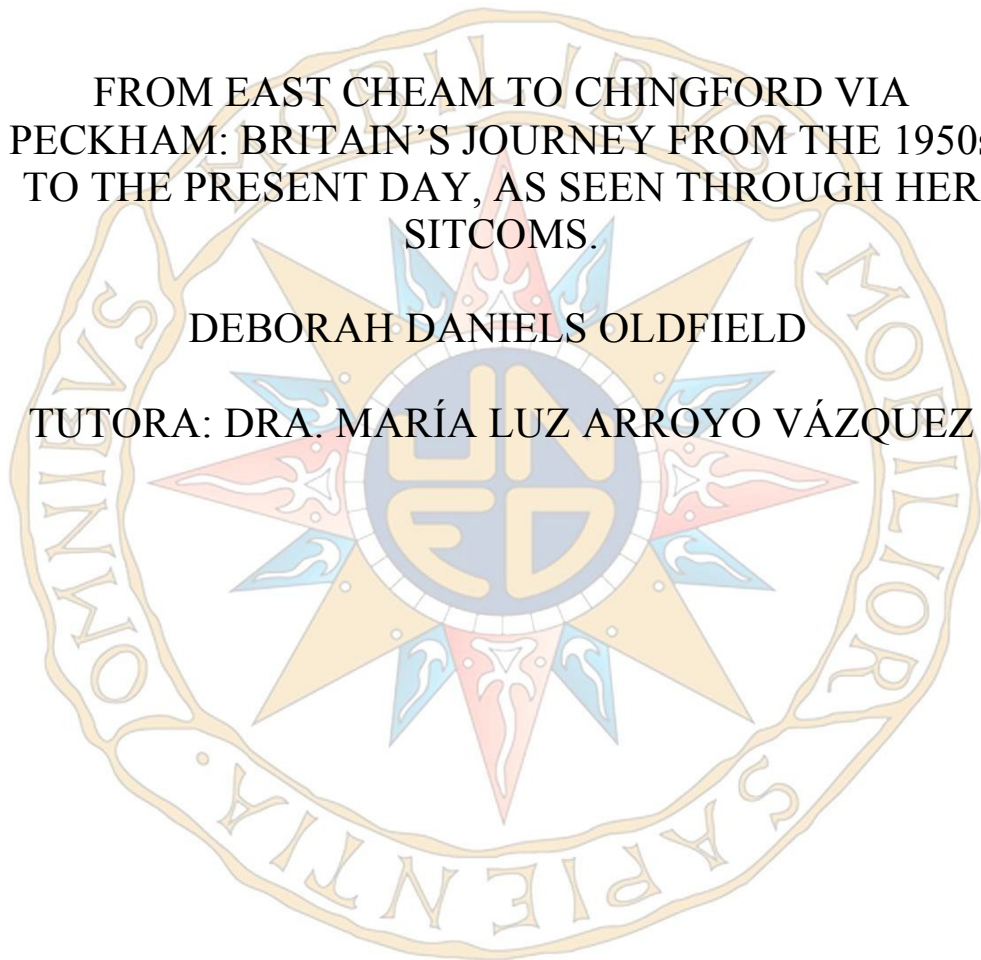


**TRABAJO DE FIN DE MÁSTER EN ESTUDIOS
LITERARIOS Y CULTURALES INGLESES Y SU
PROYECCIÓN SOCIAL**

FROM EAST CHEAM TO CHINGFORD VIA
PECKHAM: BRITAIN'S JOURNEY FROM THE 1950s
TO THE PRESENT DAY, AS SEEN THROUGH HER
SITCOMS.

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Título del Trabajo: From East Cheam To Chingford Via Peckham: Britain's Journey From
the 1950s To the Present Day, As Seen Through Her Sitcoms.

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List of Television Sitcoms Featured (in alphabetical order)

Absolutely Fabulous – first broadcast BBC 12th November 1992. Writers: Jennifer Saunders, Dawn French, Sue Perkins. Directors: Bob Spiers, Dewi Humphreys. Producer: Jon Plowman.

All Gas and Gaiters – first broadcast BBC 17th May 1966. Writers: Pauline Devaney, Edwin Apps. Directed and produced by: John Howard Davies, Stuart Allen.

'Allo 'Allo – first broadcast BBC 30th December 1982. Writers: David Croft, Jeremy Lloyd. Directors: David Croft, Martin Dennis, John B. Hobbs. Producers: David Croft, John B. Hobbs, Mike Stephens.

Are You Being Served – first broadcast BBC 8th September 1972. Writers: Jeremy Lloyd, David Croft. Directors: Ray Butt, Bob Spiers, John Kilby. Producer: David Croft.

Birds of a Feather – first broadcast BBC 16th October 1989. Writers: Maurice Gran, Laurence Marks, Gary Lawson, John Phelps, Geoff Rowley, Sue Teddern, Peter Tilbury, Geoff Deane and others. Directors: Terry Kinane, Charlie Hanson, Martin Dennis, Nic Phillips, Baz Taylor. Producers: Allan McKeown, Maurice Gran, Laurence Marks, Michael Pilsworth, Nic Phillips, Charlie Hanson, Humphrey Barclay, and others.

Dad's Army – first broadcast 31st July 1968. Writers: David Croft, Jimmy Perry. Directors: David Croft, Harold Snoad. Producer: David Croft.

Doctor in the House – first broadcast ITV/LWT 11th July 1969. Writers: Graeme Garden, Bill Oddie. Director: David Askey. Producer: Humphrey Barclay.

Fawlty Towers – first broadcast BBC 19th September 1975. Writers: John Cleese, Connie Booth. Directors: Bob Spiers, John Howard Davies. Producers: John Howard Davies, Douglas Argent.

Hancock's Half Hour – first broadcast BBC 6th July 1956. Writers: Ray Galton, Alan Simpson. Directed and produced by: Alan Tarrant, Duncan Wood.

Just Good Friends – first broadcast BBC 22nd September 1983. Writer: John Sullivan. Directors: Ray Butt, Sue Bysh. Producer: Ray Butt.

Keeping up Appearances – first broadcast BBC 29th October 1990. Writer: Roy Clarke. Directed and produced by: Harold Snoad.

Life with the Lyons – first broadcast BBC 17th September 1957. Writers: Bebe Daniels, Bob Block, Bob Ross. Director: John Phillips. Producer: Barry Baker.

Love Thy Neighbour – first broadcast ITV/Thames 13th April 1972. Writers: Vince Powell, Harry Driver. Directed and produced by: Anthony Parker, Stuart Allen, Ronnie Baxter.

Mind Your Language – first broadcast ITV/LWT 30th December 1977. Writer: Vince Powell. Director: Stuart Allen. Producers: Stuart Allen, Albert Moses, Bachu Patel.

Miranda – first broadcast BBC 9th November 2009. Writers: Miranda Hart, James Cary, Richard Hurst. Directors: Juliet May, Mandie Fletcher. Producers: Jo Sargent, Miranda Hart.

Mrs Brown's Boys – first broadcast TVÉ1 1st January 2011. Writer: Brendan O'Carroll. Directors: Brendan O'Carroll, Jennifer Gibney. Producers: Brendan O'Carroll, Jennifer Gibney, Fiona O'Carroll.

Mum – first broadcast 13th May 2016. Writer: Stefan Golaszewski. Directors: Stefan Golaszewski, Richard Laxton. Producers: Lyndsay Robinson, Stefan Golaszewski, Kenton Allen, Matthew Justice.

My Family – first broadcast BBC 19th September 2000. Writers: Fred Barron, Ian Brown, James Hendrie, Jim Armogida, Brian Leveson, Andrea Solomons. Directors: Dewi Humphreys, Ed Bye, Baz Taylor, Nic Phillips. Producers: John Bartlett, Donald Taffner Jr., Clive Hedges, Ian Brown, James Hendrie, Angie Billington, Michael Jacob, Brian Leveson, Paul Minett.

Nearest and Dearest – first broadcast ITV/Granada 15th August 1968. Writers: Roy Bottomley, Tom Brennand, John Stevenson, Harry Driver, Vince Powell. Directors: Bill Podmore, June Howson. Producers: Bill Podmore, Peter Eckersley.

Oh Brother – first broadcast BBC 13th September 1968. Writers: David Climie, Austin Steele. Directed and produced by: Johnny Downes, Duncan Wood.

Only Fools and Horses – first broadcast BBC 8th September 1981. Writer: John Sullivan. Directors: Tony Dow, Ray Butt. Producers: Ray Butt, Gareth Gwenlan, John Sullivan.

On The Buses – first broadcast ITV/LWT 28th February 1969. Writers: Ronald Chesney, Ronald Wolfe. Directors: Stuart Allen, Howard Ross. Producers: Stuart Allen, Derrick Goodwin.

Outnumbered – first broadcast 28th August 2007. Writers: Andy Hamilton, Guy Jenkins. Directors: Andy Hamilton, Guy Jenkins. Producers: Andy Hamilton, Guy Jenkins, Jimmy Mulville, Pat Lees.

Rising Damp – first broadcast ITV 2nd September 1974. Writer: Eric Chapell. Directed and produced by: Vernon Lawrence, Ronnie Baxter, Ian MacNaughton.

Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em – first broadcast BBC 15th February 1973. Writers: Raymond Allen, Michael Crawford. Directed and produced by: Michael Mills, Sydney Lotterby.

Staged – first broadcast BBC 10th June 2020. Writers: Simon Evans, Phil Glynn.
Director: Simon Evans. Producers: Shane Allen, Phil Glynn, Victor Glynn, Michael Sheen, David Tennant, Georgia Tennant.

Steptoe and Son – first broadcast BBC 5th January 1962. Writers: Ray Galton, Alan Simpson. Directed and produced by: Duncan Wood, Douglas Argent, John Howard Davies, David Croft.

Terry and June/Happy Ever After – first broadcast 7th May 1974. Writers: John T. Chapman, Eric Merriman. Directed and produced by: Ray Butt, Peter Whitmore.

The Army Game – first broadcast BBC 19th June 1957. Writers: Maurice Wiltshire, Sid Colin, Lew Schwarz. Directors: Max Morgan Witts, Gordon Flemyng. Producer: Peter Eton.

The Kumars at No. 42 – first broadcast 12th November 2001. Writers: George Jeffrie, Bert Tyler-Moore, Suk Pannu, Sanjeev Bhaskar. Directors: Lisa Evans, Nick Wood.
Producers: Lissa Evans, Richard Pinto, Sharat Sardana.

The Likely Lads – first broadcast BBC 16th December 1964. Writers: Dick Clement, Ian La Frenais. Directed and produced by: Dick Clement.

The Royle Family – first broadcast BBC 14th September 1998. Writers: Caroline Aherne, Craig Cash, Henry Normal. Directors: Caroline Aherne, Mark Mylod, Steve Bendelack.
Producers: Kenton Allen, Caroline Aherne, Craig Cash, Henry Normal.

The Vicar of Dibley – first broadcast BBC 10th November 1994. Writers: Richard Curtis, Paul Mayhew-Archer. Directors: Dewi Humphreys, Gareth Carrivick, Barbara Wiltshire. Producers: Peter Bennett-Jones, Richard Curtis, Jon Plowman.

Till Death Us Do Part – first broadcast BBC 22nd July 1965. Writer: Johnny Speight.
Directed and produced by: Dennis-Main Wilson, Douglas Argent, Colin Strong.

1. Introduction

Whilst studying my degree in English Language, Literature and Culture at the UNED, I found that one of the most stimulating aspects of the course was the correspondence between context and content in literature, and therefore decided that this would constitute the focal point of this study.

Therefore, this project is related to the Master's subjects of *Sociedad y Cultura del Mundo Anglófono en sus Textos, Literatura e Historia, Literatura y Arte Visuales*, and *Literatura y Relaciones Transculturales*, and the theoretical framework will include the premises of Critical Discourse Analysis, Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, and Postcolonial Studies.

During my studies in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s, the context of a literary work was not included in the syllabus, often resulting in students such as myself reading set works with no understanding of the era in which the said text was penned, and thus missing the added depth and nuanced meaning of the social context of the work.

Having concluded that social, cultural, and political context would be an interesting point of departure for this final Master's research paper, it was then necessary to decide on the content. Whilst musing over this conundrum, in March 2020 a global pandemic stopped the world in its tracks. Socially isolated during the initial three months of lockdown, the television – usually no more than just an occasional form of entertainment – became for many a social lifeline, linking us to a past world, which we feared would never return.

Recognising these unprecedented times, and unable to continue filming current programmes under lockdown rules and regulations, British television programmers decided to flood the televisual market with repeats of popular sitcoms from past decades, tapping into nostalgia for times gone by when the world was far simpler, and providing the British people with some much needed laughter therapy.

Watching some of these offerings and remembering the social context in which they were first televised, provided a working hypothesis for this paper. Therefore, this Master's research paper will explore the manner in which Britain's socio-cultural and political journey from the 1950s to the present day has influenced the production of that comedic genre which is most fondly regarded in the collective social memory of the British public – the television situation comedy.

It was deemed that a pertinent point of departure for this project would be an

examination of the national institution which is British television situation comedy. Humour is as individual as it is universal, varying between nations, and appreciation of British humour within other nations also varies. Amongst other adjectives, British humour can be described as self-deprecatory, sarcastic, dry, witty, dark, or slapstick. Within the idiosyncrasy of British humour, we may argue that the television genre which best reflects the features which constitute said humour, is the television sitcom.

Television viewing has undergone exponential change since the 1950s. Prior to the onslaught of modern technology and streaming services, television consumption was a collective activity, with each member of the family settling themselves in their designated space before a lone television set in the corner of the sitting room. The patriarchal head of the household would decide which programme the family would view, depending on his own personal preference, and once technology provided us with remote controls, would monopolise said remote the entire evening.

Early and later evening schedules would be dominated by news and documentaries, however primetime viewing hours between 7pm and 9pm would always include at least one sitcom. According to Philip J. Wickham, in his PhD dissertation entitled *British Situation Comedy and "The Culture of the New Capitalism"*, "[r]atings for the most popular comedy shows could top twenty million, over a third of the population" (83). Sitcom story lines and characters would often become a topic of discussion at work or school the following day, and these discussions would contribute to a sensation of collective social wellbeing and belonging.

However, as Wickham states, in the contemporary world, "work impinges on leisure hours and now takes place in domestic as well as corporate or institutional spaces while media such as television can be consumed while travelling, at a workstation or in public places, rather than solely its previous domain of the family living room" (79). This means that viewings ratings today are not so reliable as, due to the advent of streaming services and catch-up television such as BBC IPlayer, not all viewers will be watching when the sitcom is broadcast live. Furthermore, this contemporary habit of staggered viewing also means that the camaraderie of the work conversation regarding the previous night's episode is now somewhat marred. Family viewing has also suffered, as television is no longer a collective familial activity, and family members are today more likely to watch programmes of their own choice in separate rooms, using a variety of technological devices. Despite these societal changes, however, the television sitcom remains a most popular genre, with "an ability to be part of everyday life and yet set itself apart from it to

comment and reflect on existence ... [which] still renders it powerful” (Wickham 142).

Stephen Wagg refers to Taylor (1985) and Bowes’ (1990) classification of sitcoms as containing amongst others, the following recurrent characteristics; they usually come in series of between six and a dozen episodes; they have a normal running time of thirty minutes; they have a regular cast of characters; they are usually set in Britain or the British Isles; they tend to be set in the present or recent past; each programme comprises a self-contained plot; they are normally broadcast at peak viewing times (between 7pm and 9pm); they are likely to be repeated (Wagg 3). To this we would add the following features; they usually comprise a circular narrative, although often incorporating a thread of seriality to a greater or lesser extent; they often feature running-gags or catchphrases, which capture the public imagination; and finally, a popular sitcom can become part of the fabric of British culture and national identity, and influence British society.

Although sitcom story lines are important, the characters are even more so; sitcoms will not appeal to the public if they feature good comic dialogue but wooden, shallow characters. Wickham states that, “[t]he audience needs to form some kind of relationship with the characters, which can be aided initially by the immediacy and currency of stereotypes but ultimately they need to be inhabited by performers who can convince them that they are interesting and funny enough to deserve their attention” (193). Popular sitcom characters and their catchphrases have become an integral part of British society and are regarded with genuine affection by the viewing public. Sitcom characters must allow the viewer to perceive a reflection of their own being, be it in an attitude, a life choice, or a relationship with family or friends. In his analysis of the relationship between the sitcom character and the viewer, Wickham states that, “... we have seen them age – there have been failed marriages and the birth of children and the loss of jobs – and aged ourselves and we have watched the series as our own lives have evolved” (143). The importance of the characters can be affirmed in Brett Mills’ 2005 interview with British television director and producer John Plowman, in his capacity as Head of BBC Comedy, in which Plowman also spoke of his belief that character is far more important than jokes and his advice to writers was to “take out the jokes and see if it still works” (Plowman, 2005) (Mills 57).

We may also posit that despite audience perceptions of the sitcom as simply humorous and uncomplicated, the workings of the genre are much more complex and carefully presented, with the intention of influencing the audience. According to Hilary P. Dannenberg, “[t]he sitcom ... has ... played a significant role in the formation and

reflection of British cultural consciousness, memory and identity ...” (170). Brett Mills also argues that the sitcom “is a genre often perceived to be of less worth, of less invention and of less social value than many more “serious” forms of programming (2), and coincides with Dannenberg in his perception that, “the pleasures of the sitcom are not simple, and certainly require an understanding of complex social conventions and generic rules in order for them to be enjoyed” (5).

In the same way that Shakespearian tragedies contained moments of ‘comic relief’ – such as the Porter scene immediately following Duncan’s murder in *Macbeth* – so comedy also benefits from moments of tragedy. Mills believes that, “... such ‘tragic relief’ doesn’t undermine or destroy the comic impetus of sitcom, it instead helps reassert and define it precisely by being a respite from the ceaselessness of the comedy” (7). The notion of the successful use of pathos in television sitcoms will be evident throughout this research paper, although Mills clarifies that, “the limitations placed upon the genre [mean that] it must never stray too far from humour for too long” (6).

Much has been written about the societal institution which is the British sitcom, and many academics have referred to the social context in which comedy in general is performed. Medhurst asserts that, “comic texts and performances are always produced and consumed in specific cultural and historical contexts” (10), and *Because I Tell a Joke Or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference*, comprises a compilation of essays, edited by Stephen Wagg, which address issues such as social class, female roles, gender, ethnicity and political correctness in sitcoms, and contain references to socio-political and cultural contexts of popular offerings. Maggie Andrews’ contributive essay, “Butterflies and Caustic Asides: Housewives, Comedy and the Feminist Movement”, refers to the social context of second wave feminism during the late 70s, and posits that this decade witnessed a significant shift in female roles in sitcoms; from being the butt of the humour or merely playing a supporting role, to primary roles in sitcoms “... where women have a significant voice; indeed at times theirs is the dominant voice within the text” (50). In “At Ease, Corporal: Social class and the situation comedy in British television, from the 1950s to the 1990s”, Wagg also includes socio-cultural contextualisation, mentioning events such as “the final withdrawal of the Lord Chamberlain’s powers to censor British stage plays in 1968” (8) or “the notion, popularised by the Labour Party, of a new Britain, based on achievement, rather than aristocratic privilege, [which] was an important theme in the General Election of 1964” (11).

Following research, it was deemed, however, that although texts on British sitcoms

often included reference to social context, both socio-cultural and political contextualisation, and analyses of sitcoms included in said texts, were somewhat generalised. It was therefore considered that there was an academic niche for a detailed research work, comprising separate sections on socio-cultural and political events of each decade, followed by detailed analyses of some of the most pertinent sitcom offerings of said period in order to examine the manner in which British society and her sitcoms are inextricably linked, and have mutually influenced one another over the past seven decades.

Being that the objective of this paper is to demonstrate Britain's socio-cultural and political journey of the last seventy years through analysis of her sitcoms, research for this project was carried out from a dual perspective. The first was the establishment of an historical, socio-cultural, and political timeline, which would prove stimulating and interesting, but still be pertinent to the analyses of the sitcoms, and the second was to decide which sitcoms, from the vast selection on offer, would best illustrate this changing historical face of Britain.

The initial research for the historical timeline was carried out through the website *A Bit About Britain*, the historical section of which was entitled "Modern Britain Timeline 1945 – 2000". Using this timeline as a starting point for the historical overview of each decade, each event was then researched separately online, through reliable websites such as *BBC News*, *The National Archives*, *Gov.uk* or *History.com*. Events such as the establishment of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament or The Good Friday Agreement were researched through official and government websites. Works such as Arthur Marwick's chapter on "Class", or Bill Osgerby's contribution on "Youth Culture" from *A Companion to Contemporary Britain 1939 – 2000* also proved invaluable, as did academic papers such as Tara Martin's "The Beginning of Labor's End? Britain's 'Winter of Discontent' and Working-Class Women's Activism" or Kenneth O. Morgan's, "Britain in the Seventies – Our Unfinest Hour?"

The drawback which was encountered whilst carrying out historical research was the fact that historical timelines, and indeed written texts, did not include the last twenty years; many of them ending in the year 2000. Being that the event which had provided me with the working hypothesis for this work had been the global pandemic of 2020-21, it was deemed important that this research paper should include the period up to and including this unprecedented historical event. Therefore, the historical timeline of the last twenty years was based on research of important individual events.

The research regarding sitcoms of each decade was initially carried out through

specific comedy websites such as *Comedy.co.uk*, *Britishsitcom.co.uk* or *BritishClassicComedy.co.uk*, which provided a list of sitcoms and the decades in which they were broadcast. Rod Taylor's *The Guinness Book of Sitcoms* was also helpful for this stage of the project. The decision as to which sitcoms would be included was taken as each historical decade was researched, based on memories of sitcoms of each era, having personally lived through all of the decades included in this work except the 50s. Following each choice of sitcom, episodes and clips were initially researched online however, on compiling the main body of work, the choice of excerpts, and occasionally sitcoms, would vary somewhat depending on the trajectory which each chapter began to take as it evolved. Although many of the sitcoms included in this work span decades, in order to avoid confusion, they have been included in the decade in which they were first broadcast. It was decided that, in order to ensure a selection of the most popular sitcoms of each era, only prime-time sitcoms would be included; 'prime-time' referring to those sitcoms broadcast between 7pm and 9pm.

The first section of this work will discuss post-war Britain and the infancy of the television sitcom, whilst subsequent sections will each take in two consecutive decades. The analysis of each decade will commence with an historical overview of the most important socio-cultural and political events of the period, followed by an explanation and analysis of some of the most popular sitcoms of the era, together with discussion regarding the extent to which said sitcoms reflected the changes which Britain had undergone during the decade. Clips and excerpts will be included as footnotes, in order to aid explanation and understanding of both historical events and the featured sitcoms, and enhance reader enjoyment.

Through this detailed analysis of the socio-cultural and political context of the last seven decades, and the most popular sitcoms which graced our screens during each era, we will explore the extent to which the context of British society and the content of her sitcoms have mutually influenced and transformed one another.

2. Post-war Britain Gives Birth To the Television Sitcom

This section will provide an insight into the early stages of the television sitcom – in a post war era in which Britain was acclimatising herself to the gradual decline of her Empire, worrying herself about the emergence of the Cold War, and boosting the economy of a nation still under punishing food-rationing restrictions.

2.1. Britain in the 1950s – Rebuilding the Nation

Despite the success of Winston Churchill's coalition government during the Second World War, the Labour leader Clement Atlee won an overall majority in the General Election of 1945, having promised widespread social reform and better housing, more employment, and the introduction of the National Health Service, which would offer free medical treatment for all. In February 1950, Labour won the following election also, and Atlee was returned as Prime Minister, with a slashed majority of merely five seats. In June of the same year, South Korea was invaded by North Korea and Britain was forced to send troops to aid her South Korean-supporting United States ally. This deployment of troops so soon after the Second World War was a costly exercise.

By the 1950s Britain's home economy was booming – employment was high and economic growth was rising. In *A Companion to Contemporary Britain 1939-2000*, Arthur Marwick speaks of economic security during the decade of the 50s and cites a plumber, interviewed in 1951, as saying, "There is now so much work to be done and so little unemployment ... [that] if the boss ... threatens you with the sack you can just get up and leave..." (82).

Women however, did not constitute a large part of this employment boom. Although they had made a considerable contribution to the war effort, working in munitions factories, as drivers, land girls or even pilots, after the war they were once again relegated to the private sphere of the home and during the 1950s, once married, few women worked outside the home. Girls were taught to sew, darn and cook at school and were essentially prepared for married life which would see them tending to their husband, children and the home.

King George VI opened the Festival of Britain in May 1951 – aimed at transmitting a post-war sensation of optimism and confidence in Britain and the future of the nation. An early election, called in October 1951 led to Churchill's Conservative party regaining power,

and Churchill becoming the second oldest prime minister in British history, at the ripe old age of seventy seven.

One of the most pressing political issues of the 1950s was the deterioration of the relationship between the West and the East. Following World War II, the Soviets' installation of left wing governments in Eastern European countries which had been liberated by the Soviet army at the end of the war, led to openly hostile relations between the West – including the United States - and the East, where the Soviets' had assured the installment of communist regimes in countries such as Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary or the GDR (“The Cold War”, *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*). As early as 1946, in a speech given at Westminster College, Missouri, in the United States, Winston Churchill had stated that, “[f]rom Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent” (“The Sinews of Peace”, *International Churchill Society*).

Due to the tensions created between the West and the East, spying and counter-spying between nations became the order of the day. In 1951, the existence of a Soviet spy-ring in British diplomatic circles – known as the Cambridge Five – caused great ministerial embarrassment, when Guy Burgess, who had held posts in MI6 and the Foreign Office, and Donald Maclean, who had worked on the Combined Policy Committee on Atomic Development, fled Britain. Five years later, they gave a news conference from Moscow, stating that they were living as communists, but denying that they had been spies. The third member of their spy ring, Harold ‘Kim’ Philby, defected to Moscow in 1963, and in November 1979, then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher would reveal to the House of Commons that the fourth member of the “Five” was Sir Anthony Blunt. Blunt was a Cambridge-educated art historian, and a distant cousin of the Queen Mother, and was employed as Surveyor of the Queen’s Pictures at Buckingham Palace. In 1964, Blunt offered MI5 a full confession in exchange for immunity from prosecution, and the Queen was informed of Blunt’s espionage activities. He continued to be employed at Buckingham Palace until his retirement in 1972, and was not publicly outed until Thatcher’s revelation to the Commons in 1979, upon which he was stripped of his knighthood. It is not altogether clear why Blunt was not sacked immediately on admitting to his spying activities in the 60s, although speculation has recently increased that he could have been in possession of compromising pro-Hitler correspondence, written by the then Duke of Windsor, which would have proved extremely embarrassing to the Royal Family if the contents of the letters were ever to be made public. John Cairncross – the last member of

the spy ring – was officially named as the “fifth man” in 1990.

On 6th February 1952, King George VI died in his sleep, and was succeeded by his daughter Elizabeth, who would become Queen Elizabeth II, and is today Britain’s longest reigning monarch. The decision to televise her coronation, which took place on 2nd June 1953, led to more television sets being bought in Britain than ever before. According to the Science Museum’s website, “[e]stimates put the total number installed by the time of the coronation broadcast at 2.5 million” (“Television Reigns: Broadcasting Queen Elizabeth’s Coronation”, *Science Museum*).

Food rationing, which had been introduced in January 1940, eventually came to an end in 1954 – the last item to be de-rationed being meat. Rationing had been introduced during the war in order to ensure that there was enough food for all, in a country which imported seventy per cent of its consumption (“The Nation at a Standstill”, *Imperial War Museum*). Each household had been issued with a ration book, which shopkeepers would stamp when housewives shopped for food. The system had led to long queues outside shops, and it was not uncommon for the item which one was queuing for to run out before one reached the head of the queue, so the end of rationing was received with elation.

In July 1954 the government agreed to proceed with a British H-bomb, and on 15th May 1957, Britain detonated its first hydrogen bomb in the South Pacific, thus becoming the world’s third nuclear power. In October of the previous year, Britain had switched on her first nuclear power station – Calder Hall – in Cumbria. In the same year, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was formed, their aim being to dissuade the government from backing nuclear weapons. The CND website states that although following their formation, early years saw a rapid increase in membership, this then fell somewhat during the Vietnam war, as people found other issues which they wished to protest about (“The History of CND”, *Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament*).

By 1955, Winston Churchill, forced to retire due to ill health, had been succeeded by Sir Anthony Eden, Churchill’s former Foreign Secretary. However, Eden himself would also resign in January 1957, after an Anglo-Franco-Israeli conspiracy to retake the newly nationalised Egyptian Suez Canal, resulted in global condemnation and the threat of United States sanctions. Eden was replaced by Harold Macmillan, his former Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The end of conscription was confirmed when in 1957, the Defence Review initiated a transition period with a final aim of abolishing obligatory National Service. Conscription had been introduced in 1947, and applied to all able-bodied men between the ages of

eighteen and thirty. Between 1947 and 1950 the period of conscription was limited to eighteen months, although during the Korean War (1950-53), this was increased to two years. Conscription would eventually end in 1960, with the last conscripted serviceman being demobbed in 1963 (“What Was National Service?”, *The National Army Museum*).

Roland Quinault explains that during the 1950s, Britain was a country which placed great store on military armament and readiness, and society was still heavily influenced by war. Previous generations had served in the First and Second World Wars, and most young men were required to fulfil their National Service duties (“Britain in 1950”, *History Today*). Governments during the 1950s faced the unenviable task of rebuilding the fabric of Britain – both physically and metaphorically. As we will see, the influence of war will be evident in both radio sitcoms such as *Much Binding in the Marsh* and television sitcoms such as *The Army Game*.

Britain had always been a country with deep social structures, but during the late 50s and early 60s these began to be questioned. The generation of writers known as the “Angry Young Men” - working class and middle class playwrights and novelists, such as John Osborne, Alan Sillitoe or Kingsley Amis, began to rail against the class-conscious social order, bringing the reality of working class life to the fore in their plays and novels. As we now explore the emergence of television sitcoms during the 1950s, we will see how humour was already becoming a powerful weapon in the social critique of class issues, through television sitcoms such as *Hancock’s Half Hour* or *The Army Game*.

2.2. Television Sitcoms in the 1950s – Class, Conscripts and Competition

British situation comedy had taken its first toddling steps in the 1930s, when this new media genre was unleashed on an appreciative audience through the popular medium of radio. According to Stephen Wagg, two factors influenced the birth of this new type of light entertainment – firstly, sketches performed by entertainers such as Arthur Askey and Richard Murdoch, and secondly, the popularity of US radio sitcoms, which had been witnessed by BBC executives visiting the United States (3). Wagg states that Askey and Murdoch’s radio programme *Band Waggon*, which was broadcast for the first time in 1938, and featured longer comedy sketches, “is ... the earliest forerunner of British sitcom proper” (3).

Although the BBC had begun emitting programmes in November 1936, broadcasting was limited to London and the South East, and was curtailed on 1st September 1939 at the start

of the Second World War, not resuming until 1946. The government also initially ordered all theatres and cinemas to close, leaving radio as the only form of entertainment available to the British public; this inevitably led to a boom in radio comedy throughout the war (Wagg 3). There were nine million licensed radios across the UK during the war and half the nation would tune in to the nine o'clock news each evening ("The Nation at a Standstill", *Imperial War Museum*). However, the listening public also needed some distraction from the sombreness of war, and this they found in the advent of a radio show called "It's That Man Again", a humorous reference to a headline in the *Daily Express* newspaper, referring to Adolf Hitler. This popular show would become known by the initials ITMA (Wagg 3). Wagg explains that the programme ran between 1939 and 1940 and then again for seven years from 1942 to 1949, and "at its height ... had an audience of around 16 million..." (3). One of the aspects of the show which most captured the audience's imagination was the different characters' catchphrases, such as "I don't mind if I do" – uttered by Colonel Chinstrap, who "saw every enquiry as an invitation to have a drink" or "ta ta for now" – which the charlady Mrs Mopp would say when taking her leave ("It's That Man Again", *History of the BBC*). Catchphrases such as these were then used by subsequent generations who were unaware that they had originated in wartime radio sitcoms. The character of Colonel Chinstrap would be reborn in the 1970s, as Major Gowen in John Cleese and Connie Booth's *Fawlty Towers*, and would use the same catchphrase.

Radio comedy continued to proliferate after the end of the war, initially featuring subject matter related to demobilisation of the armed forces and the return to civilian life. One such example is *Much Binding in the Marsh* (1947-54), in which a now unused RAF base takes on new life as a country club for ex-RAF servicemen, who are now engaged in various civilian occupations (Wagg 4). *Much Binding in the Marsh* was written by Richard Murdoch and Kenneth Horne and was extremely popular with the public; one broadcast was even attended by members of the Royal family, including Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh.¹

Although as mentioned before, television broadcasting had resumed in June 1946, during the early 1950s there were few television sitcoms. The BBC was the only broadcasting corporation at the time and therefore monopolised the medium (Wagg 4). Those sitcoms which were broadcast by the BBC, often transferred from the medium of radio where they

¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nEJYkHtzns "Richard Murdoch – Much Binding In The Marsh" at 4mins 0secs.

were already immensely popular. One of these was *Life with the Lyons*, a situation comedy written by American actress Bebe Daniels and starring herself, her husband Ben Lyon, and their real-life family. Daniels not only starred in but also wrote the show, and the episodes that she wrote reflected their actual family life, “to the extent that when Daniels and Lyon moved home, the sitcom family moved too” (“Life with the Lyons” *History of the BBC*). *Life with the Lyons*, one of the first family situation comedies, transferred well from radio to television and even became a West End play and a feature film. As we will see later in this work, over fifty years later, Irish actor and writer Brendan O’Carroll would use the same real-life family format for *Mrs Brown’s Boys*, although in a somewhat more irreverent manner. Following the same path as its predecessor, *Mrs Brown’s Boys* would also begin life as a radio show before transferring to television, stage, and film. The BBC cites *Life with the Lyons* as the “template for many sitcoms that followed, up to and including *My Family* and *Outnumbered*”, both of which will feature later, in the section of this work which is dedicated to the decade of the 2000s (“Life with the Lyons”, *History of the BBC*).

In 1955 the first British commercial television station and the BBC’s main competitor – ITV – was launched. To this day, these two television channels remain each other’s main competitors, although they are both currently challenged by global streaming services.

Despite the launch of other commercial television channels such as Channel 4 in 1982 and Channel 5 in 1997, the BBC and ITV remain the channels “*par excellence*” for situation comedies; all of those which will be mentioned in this work have been broadcast either on the BBC or ITV, sometimes even on both, although never simultaneously. Following the launch of ITV, the latter years of the 1950s saw a proliferation of television sitcoms. According to Stephen Wagg, during the second half of the decade, the BBC broadcast about fourteen sitcoms, whilst ITV trumped their rivals with eighteen (4).

One such offering from ITV, which debuted in 1957, was *The Army Game*, written by Sid Colin and Maurice Wiltshire. The setting for *The Army Game* was a Surplus Ordnance Depot in Staffordshire, and the storyline revolved around a group of army conscripts and their efforts to make their period of National Service more bearable by having as much fun as possible, and behaving as irreverently as possible. Viewers who were serving conscripts or had family that were, enjoyed the portrayal of stereotypical characters such as the upper-class Lieutenant Finch, who has trouble pronouncing the letter ‘r’, and on opening a locker asks one of the conscripts, “What’s all this wubbish doing down here?” As we will see later, in today’s sitcom world a speech impediment would be considered politically

incorrect comedy material. In *The Army Game*, the actor Michael Medwin played the role of a “wide-boy” Cockney character, who went by the name of Corporal Springer. Rod Taylor states that the character of Springer “brought his endemic Cockney ability as a scrounger into the Army” (24). Stephen Wagg believes that, “sitcom writers and audiences have always favoured the character who is culturally ‘of the people’ but who is formally working on his own account... - the tipster, the travelling salesman, the wheeler-and-dealer” (4). This ‘loveable rogue’ Cockney stereotype had already become a staple character of radio comedy, transferred easily to television and as we will see, will resurface in subsequent decades.

Although ITV commissioned writers to write new sitcoms, as we have mentioned previously, the situation was somewhat easier for the BBC, who could make use of their existing radio sitcoms and simply transfer them to the medium of television (Wagg 4). Perhaps the most famous radio sitcom to undergo this transfer from the radio airwaves to television was *Hancock’s Half Hour*, which Stephen Wagg refers to as “the most powerful TV situation comedy of the decade” (6). Written by Ray Galton, Alan Simpson and Tony Hancock, *Hancock’s Half Hour* had first been broadcast on radio in 1954, and became so popular that even when it transferred to television in 1956, also continued to be broadcast on the radio. Hancock played a pretentious, socially-anxious gentleman who went by the name of Anthony Aloysius St John Hancock. In the sitcom, Hancock lived and associated with Sidney Balmoral James, played by the actor Sid James. The comedy action revolves around Hancock spending his life trying to better himself, whilst James retaliates by pricking Hancock’s utopian, highfalutin bubble at every opportunity. In an episode entitled “The Poison Pen Letter”, the audience finds Hancock dressed in a three-piece suit with cravat and reading *The Times* at breakfast, whilst James sits in his dressing-gown, yawning, scratching his head, and asking, “Why can’t we get a decent paper? One with pictures in?” Hancock’s cleaning lady, Mrs Cravatte, also makes a reference to class issues when she objects to being told to serve breakfast, and whilst leaving the room declares, “Anyone would think we was back to them pre-war days. It’s us what goes to Monte Carlo these days, not the likes of ‘im. It’s us whats got the big cars. I don’t know why I don’t just chuck this job in...”²

As we will see throughout this work, the notion of “class” or lack of said, is a recurrent

² www.dailymotion.com/video/x5gu3gs “Hancock’s Half Hour - The Poison Pen Letter” at 3mins 30secs.

theme in British television sitcoms. Members of the upper class are often portrayed as bumbling and out-of-touch with reality, whilst the lower classes are either lauded or ridiculed. Most humour in situation comedy however, seems to be found in the middle classes who long to be socially upwardly mobile. A prime example of this characterisation can be found in Tony Hancock's character in *Hancock's Half Hour*. It may be posited that Hancock's "address" of "Railway Cuttings", in "East Cheam" is an ironic nod to the character's desire to better himself and the elite's desire to keep him in his place. "Railway Cuttings" refers to an area through which railway lines pass, therefore houses back on to the railway, and noise and pollution lead to lessened property value, and although Cheam is an affluent area in the county of Surrey, the addition of the geographical fictional affix "East", indicates a lower class area (Wagg 7). In episodes which were televised in the 1960s, Hancock had "moved" to Earls Court in London, described by Stephen Wagg as an area "close enough to the West End of London to give the promise of sophistication" (7), but nevertheless an area of the metropolis known for a proliferation of student flats and cheap boarding houses (Wagg 7).

The characterisation of the socially needy individual who longs to escape the reality of belonging to the hoi polloi, and rub shoulders with the rich and sophisticated, has been evident throughout the history of British sitcoms – as we will see later in this work in characters such as Harold Steptoe in *Steptoe and Son*, or Hyacinth Bucket in *Keeping Up Appearances*.

In *Hancock's Half Hour*, Sid James provides the comedy foil to Hancock's pomposity, playing the previously mentioned archetypal lovable Cockney rogue character, who operates along the limits of legality, and continually reminds Hancock that his reality is far from the elegant and sophisticated existence he attempts to present to the outer world (Wagg 7). Throughout Hancock's attempts at sophistication and worldliness, his real persona continually breaks through the façade in interjections such as "Stone me!" or "Bonkers!" which serve to endear him to the viewers. Stephen Wagg refers to these as "unacceptable lapses for the genuinely aspiring in the 1950s" (7) and acknowledges that these enhance Hancock's "vulnerability" (7).

After Hancock broke off his writing partnership with Galton and Simpson in 1961, he never managed to attain the same level of popularity in his subsequent work. Galton and Simpson would go on to pen the television sitcom *Steptoe and Son*, which featured a similar relationship between the father and son characters of Albert and Harold Steptoe as that between Hancock and James, as we will see in our perusal of 1960s sitcoms. Stephen

Wagg refers to the recurrent theme of social class in sitcoms and states that, “[i]t’s this interplay between realistic and romantic notions of the relationship between the social classes ... which seems ... to characterise the most successful sitcoms on British television” (8), and as we will see throughout this work, class issues beget comedy.

Early sitcoms would rely on the “circular narrative” structure, whereby a situation presented to the audience through familiar characters would be followed by events which would upset the status quo and heighten the comedic aspect, such as complicating action or mistaken identity, before resolution and restoration of peace and tranquility - until the following episode. Each episode would form a self-contained unit and viewers could dip in and out of the series at will. As we will explore in forthcoming sections, it was not until the 70s and 80s that sitcom writers began to use seriality of narrative in their scripts.

Those sitcoms on which we have concentrated here, reflect a nation emerging from the constraints of war, into a class structured era in which the Establishment, authority and one’s elders expected, and on the whole received, respect and obedience. However, by the end of the 1950s, social change was imminent; the swinging 60s would herald a more liberated Britain, and cultural changes would abound. We will explore these changes, and the influence which they brought to the television sitcoms of the next decade in the following section.

3. The Swinging Sixties and the Striking Seventies Herald the “Golden Age” of the Sitcom

This section will explore two of the most influential decades in Britain’s socio-cultural and political history – the 60s and 70s.

Britain was at the forefront of a cultural revolution in music, fashion, and art during the era known as the ‘Swinging 60s’, and London was the city to see and be seen in. Employment was high, business was booming, and a younger generation who had no recollection of the Second World War, were forging their way towards a bright future.

During the decade of the 70s, progress and change continued, as second-wave feminists began to campaign for women’s rights and protest against the objectification of women; however, the economy faltered badly during the 1970s, causing mass unemployment and punishing public sector strikes. We will explore these issues and more in this section and will examine how sitcoms of the 60s and 70s also reflected societal change, but not necessarily in a positive manner. As we will see, whilst some 60s sitcoms transmitted a sensation of nostalgia for previous eras, others showed a reliance on gender and racial stereotyping as a source of humour, which continued into the 70s and would be considered unacceptable in contemporary broadcasting.

3.1. Britain in the 1960s – They’d Never Had It So Good

The 1960s were arguably Britain’s most promising years; in a world which had emerged from the bleakness of two World Wars, Britain and in particular London, became synonymous with fun, freedom, and frolics. Those that lived through the 60s speak of a palpable sensation of excitement permeating the air. London fashion and makeup brands such as Mary Quant or Biba graced the cover of Vogue magazine³, and teenagers on both sides of the Atlantic danced uninhibitedly to British bands such as The Beatles, The Rolling Stones or Pink Floyd. The style and flair of successful British models such as Jean Shrimpton or Twiggy encouraged thousands of teenagers to emulate their fashion finesse and hairstyles - Twiggy’s short pixie cut becoming the most requested in British hairdressers. Actors such as Albert Finney or Michael Caine were riding on the crest of a wave of popularity and were lauded by critics and public alike. The fact that many of these

³ In Summer 2019, the Victoria and Albert Museum dedicated an exhibition to these iconic British fashion brands of the 60s.

new idols were working class meant that for the first time, success became not necessarily synonymous with class; Stephen Wagg states that –

... the prevailing ideology of ‘openness’ in British society during the 1960s, bulwarked by the media celebration of pop stars, film actors, photographers and the like who came from working class backgrounds, brought with it an important severing of class and status: by the late 1960s, for a large segment of the British population, you could be rich, successful *and* drop your ‘h’s’. (Wagg’s emphasis) (13)

In October 1959, Harold Macmillan’s Conservative party had won a successive election with an increased majority. The slogan used by the Tories during their election campaign – “You’ve Never Had It So Good” – became synonymous with the decade of the 60s. Unemployment was at a record low and the economy was forging onwards and upwards – young people were going straight into full time employment on leaving school or university, and made full use of their disposable income, which in turn boosted the economy significantly.

Liberalisation of the arts was the name of the game during this decade – in 1960, Penguin books first published a paperback full text edition of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, a novel which had previously been banned for thirty years, and in 1968 the Lord Chamberlain’s powers of censorship of stage plays were formally abolished – said powers having been written in law since the 16th century.

The medium of radio also underwent radical changes in the decade of the 60s. Until 1964 the radiowaves were dominated by the BBC, an institution that balked at the introduction of popular music and decreed that it should only be played for one hour a week (“Radio Caroline returns to the airwaves”, *BBC News*). In 1964 Radio Caroline, an offshore radio station, was broadcast for the first time. To the delight of thousands of British teenagers, Radio Caroline would broadcast pop music all day. However, in 1967 the Marine Broadcasting Offences Act declared Radio Caroline an illegal – or pirate – station. Recognising the popularity of this new musical genre, the BBC launched Radio 1 in September 1967, offering Britain’s teenagers their beloved pop music, thus reducing the need to tune in to Radio Caroline (“Start of Radio 1” *History of the BBC*). The first popular music show on Radio 1, was hosted by DJ Tony Blackburn, who had previously worked for Radio Caroline. More than fifty years later, Blackburn still hosts a regular show, although now on Radio 2, which is fittingly entitled “Sounds of the Sixties”, and is extremely popular with “children” of the 60s, who are now entering retirement years.

The BBC launched a new television channel – BBC 2 - in April 1964; the first programme to be broadcast being the children’s programme *Play School*. BBC 2 has traditionally been considered the more intellectual of the two channels, and is described by the Corporation as comprising, “[f]actual programmes ... including arts, history, science and human interest documentaries” (“The BBC’s Services In the UK”, *BBC*). Some of the sitcoms which we will discuss in this and further sections began life on BBC 2, before switching to BBC 1, which is considered more mainstream; others such as *Fawlty Towers* or *Mum* have only ever been broadcast on BBC 2.

It was not solely in the field of the arts that liberalisation was prevalent during the decade of the 60s. In 1961, the birth control pill for women was introduced, effectively changing women’s lives, and affording the female sex a power and control over their sexuality and reproduction, which they had previously been denied.

In 1961, an Act of Parliament was passed which decriminalised suicide – suicide attempts having previously been punishable with fines or even prison sentences. On 8th November 1965, Britain abolished the death penalty, and in July 1967 the Sexual Offences Act legalised homosexuality between men over twenty-one in England and Wales. In this case however, liberalisation did not extend over the borders – homosexuality was not legalised until 1980 in Scotland and 1981 in Northern Ireland.

Decriminalisation of abortion took place in October 1967, when the British Parliament passed the Abortion Act, allowing this practice to be carried out under certain circumstances under the National Health Service.

In 1969, the Divorce Reform Act decreed that divorce could now be requested on the grounds of adultery, ‘objectionable behaviour’, desertion, or if the couple had lived apart for two years, if both consented to the divorce, or five years if one party did not consent (“Divorce Reform Act 1969”, *The National Archives*).

Following a series of scandals – most noticeably the Profumo Affair – Prime Minister Harold Macmillan was forced to resign in 1963, being replaced by Sir Alec Douglas-Home, who had held the position of Foreign Secretary under Macmillan’s mandate. Even in newly liberalised Britain, the Profumo Affair shocked and scandalised the public and rocked Macmillan’s government. The scandal revolved around several topics, which proved fascinating and titillating for both the press and the general public; government ministers, Russian spies, beautiful young women, and sex.

John Profumo, Secretary of State for War in Macmillan’s Conservative government, had been introduced to and began an affair with Christine Keeler, a nineteen-year-old

dancer from London in 1961. Keeler and Profumo were introduced by Stephen Ward, an osteopath, whose clients and contacts ranged from the aristocracy to members of the criminal underworld. Whilst engaged in the affair with Profumo, Christine Keeler was simultaneously carrying on a liaison with Eugene Ivanov, a Russian military attaché. Rumours of Profumo's involvement with Keeler began to circulate, and on 22nd March 1961 questions were asked in Parliament. Profumo made a statement in Parliament that, "there was no impropriety whatsoever in my acquaintanceship with Miss Keeler", and proceeded to state that he would sue for libel and slander if allegations continued to be made ("British Secretary of War John Profumo Resigns Amid Sex Scandal", *History*). Just over two months later, Profumo was forced to admit that he had lied to the House of Commons. Keeler was put on trial for perjury and conspiracy, after lying in court in an attempt to secure the conviction of another lover, Aloysius 'Lucky' Gordon, and sentenced to nine months prison, eventually serving only half of her sentence. Stephen Ward was charged with pimping and put on trial, committing suicide on the last day of his trial. Interestingly, the only participant to emerge relatively unscathed was Profumo himself, who reinvented himself as a philanthropist and in 1975, was awarded the C.B.E. (Commander of the British Empire), for his services to society. The Profumo affair continues to fascinate the public today, and in 2019 was the subject of a BBC miniseries, which reignited interest in the historical sex scandal.⁴

In 1964, the Labour Party, under the leadership of Harold Wilson, returned to power. Wilson was known as a pipe-smoking "man of the people", and the pipe-smoking image would become as synonymous with Wilson as cigars had been with Churchill. Soon after taking power, the Labour government put into practice a radical overhaul of the education system, obliging local education authorities to begin implementing plans to replace Britain's secondary schools – grammar and secondary modern – with a new system known as the Comprehensive education system.

Not only did Wilson wish to be identified with the elder voters, but he was also keen to present the Labour Party as synonymous with youth and freedom, and in tune with the younger generation, presenting the Beatles with a Variety Club award in 1964 and MBE's (Member of the British Empire) in 1965. Bill Oggersby speaks of " ... Wilson's attempt to promote a vision of a 'New Britain' characterised by forward-looking, youthful vigour – a strategy repeated by Tony Blair thirty years later" (132). Although it must be said that

⁴ www.imdb.com/title/tt8001036/ "The Trial of Christine Keeler".

Tony Blair's "youthful" image of 1997, was far more successful than that presented by Wilson in the 60s.

The 1960s also saw the commencement of Britain's complicated relationship with the European Union – then known as the Common Market, or the EEC - European Economic Community. Britain had formally applied to join the European Communities on 9th August 1961, but in January 1963, the President of the French Republic General de Gaulle declared his doubts as to Britain's commitment to the Community, and vetoed their application to join, a right which he would repeat in 1967. ("The History of the European Union", *European Union*). As we will see in later decades, President de Gaulle's doubts as to Britain's commitment to the European Union would ultimately prove well founded.

In June 1968, women machinists at the Ford factory in Dagenham went on strike in protest at having been downgraded to a grade 'B' – unskilled labour, whereas men carrying out a similar task were graded as skilled labour. Barbara Castle, who was Britain's employment minister at the time, assisted with negotiations, and following a strike which lasted four weeks and crippled the factory and Ford management, the women machinists were offered a wage increase which they accepted, but incredibly were still not regraded as skilled labour until they carried out a further strike in 1984. These women's efforts were instrumental in driving forward the Equal Pay Act, which would become law in 1970 ("Dagenham Women's Strike", *TUC*). In 2010, a film entitled "Made In Dagenham", would document their struggle for equality.⁵

On 20th April 1968, politician Enoch Powell, Defence Secretary in Edward Heath's Conservative Shadow Cabinet, made a speech at a Conservative party meeting in Birmingham, which is today known as the "rivers of blood" speech.

Immigrants from the Commonwealth and ex-British colonies had begun arriving in Britain in 1948, and were instrumental in rebuilding Britain after the war years. However, many of them were not prepared for the unwelcoming attitudes of many British people. Racism was rife and those newly-arrived immigrants attempting to find housing for themselves and their families, were faced with signs in the windows of rental accommodation which baldly stated, "No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs" – effectively equating blacks and the Irish with animals. Many black immigrants found posts in public service sectors such as British Rail or the National Health Service, undertaking jobs which were absolutely essential for the running of the country, but were considered as inferior

⁵ www.imdb.com/title/tt1371155/ "Made in Dagenham".

employment by white British citizens. In his speech, Powell spoke of his constituents' uneasiness at the rate of immigration, and his certainty of the necessity to curb said immigration, warning, "As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood'".⁶

Powell's speech was decried as despicably racist, inflammatory, and divisive, and he was sacked from Heath's Shadow Cabinet. However, in effect Powell was actually publicly voicing the thoughts and attitudes of many white British people, and although his choice of language was unfortunate to say the least, numerous white British citizens understood his stance and privately agreed with him.

It must be recognised that 1960s Britain was an inherently racist and unwelcoming nation and sadly, some might say that despite best attempts, divisive, uninclusive attitudes can still be encountered today. The topic of race will be examined in more depth in our analysis of the 1970s, and in particular, we will examine the manner in which 60s and 70s sitcoms plumbed the murky depths of race issues and political incorrectness, in a well-intentioned, but ultimately flawed search for humorous content.

Britain in the 1960s was a dynamic, exhilarating nation, in which the young – hitherto expected to be "seen but not heard" - had now found their voice and their place in society; at the forefront of a cultural revolution in a developing, evolutionary nation. The decade also saw the beginnings of second-wave feminism and the start of Britain's difficult journey towards multiculturalism, pluralism, and acceptance. We will now examine whether television sitcoms of the 1960s reflected Britain's burgeoning multicultural, liberal society or conversely showed a tendency to become mired down in nostalgia, conservatism, outmoded attitudes, and racism.

3.2. Television Sitcoms in the 1960s – Clergy, Chaos and "Coons"⁷

The 1960s marked the beginning of the "Golden Age" of sitcoms; with the Second World War becoming a distant memory, television audiences would look forward to an evening of lighthearted entertainment and comedy. Writers and broadcasters were only too happy to pander to the wishes of the viewing public, and new sitcoms abounded during this

⁶ www.anth1001.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/enoch-powell_speech.pdf "Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech.

⁷ An insulting, slang term applied to blacks. Totally unacceptable and taboo in the contemporary world, and only used in this research work in the context of British situation comedy in the 1960s.

decade.

According to Stephen Wagg, diversity was prevalent in sitcoms of the 60s, so we may posit that television sitcoms of the decade reflected the dynamism and social change which we have discussed in the historical section of this decade. Wagg argues that, “ ... during the 1960s, we have the first situation comedies to focus on members of the clergy ... ” (8); television viewers were also offered diverse settings, such as bus depots or hospitals, and lastly we see a move to include regional areas in situation comedy (Wagg 9). As we will examine later in this section, although it must be conceded that sitcom writers and broadcasters began to broaden their horizons during the 1960s in an effort to appear more inclusive, we may also postulate that two of the most iconic sitcoms of the 1960s bore more than a passing resemblance to their ancestors of the 50s.

The gradual dissipation of non-questioning respect for authority, the Establishment and by definition the church, which accompanied the liberty of the 60s, led to the advent of sitcoms which were gently humorous at the expense of members of the religious orders. One such offering was *Oh Brother*, written by David Climie and Austin Steele, and first broadcast in 1968 on BBC 1. Derek Nimmo played the character of Brother Dominic, a well-meaning, but somewhat accident-prone novice monk at Mountacres Catholic Priory.

In an episode entitled “By the Fleshpots”, in which the priory awaits a visit from the fervently religious and strict Bishop Flynn of Mancaster, as the youngest novice monk, Brother Dominic is charged with leading the welcome for the visiting bishop. This is the writers’ cue for the introduction of a series of slapstick moments, which include Brother Dominic attempting to divest the bishop of his cloak without unclasping the chain round the bishop’s neck beforehand, or placing the mitre on the Bishop’s head the wrong way round.⁸ The narrative trope of mistaken identity and confusion is then brought to the fore, when the audience becomes aware that the bishop who has arrived is not the Bishop of Mancaster, who is indisposed, but Bishop Collins - a more liberal bishop. To guarantee that Brother Dominic is on his best behaviour, his superiors – Father Anselm and Brother Patrick – have decided not to tell him the bishop’s true identity, preferring Dominic to believe that the visitor is indeed the spartan Bishop of Mancaster. The humour is then found in Dominic’s attempts to eliminate the comforts of the bishop’s bedroom, extinguishing the fire by throwing a pail of water on it, and removing the mattress from the bed, in the mistaken belief that their guest is an ardent practitioner of religious asceticism.

⁸ www.dailymotion.com/video/x6csnw5 “Oh, Brother! By The Fleshpots” at 7mins 48secs.

A subsequent scene, which portrays the members of the religious order playing cards and gambling, albeit wagering “blessings” and “Hail Mary’s” rather than money, whilst smoking cigars⁹, provides a humorous and ironic take on the contrast between the image of lifelong religious devotion and the reality of a career in the church.

Derek Nimmo also starred as Mervyn Noote, chaplain of a 13th century cathedral, in another religious-themed sitcom from the BBC entitled *All Gas and Gaiters*, written by Pauline Devaney and Stuart Allen and first broadcast in 1966. Nimmo specialised in well-intentioned but somewhat inept characters, and his portrayals of Brother Dominic and Chaplain Noote led to the actor acquiring a religious connection within the inner consciousness of the viewing public, who often wondered whether Nimmo was actually a member of the clergy with a talent for acting.

Although as we have mentioned, religious orders and their members were now considered a suitable topic for situation comedy, it is interesting to note that both of the sitcoms we have featured parodied the Roman Catholic religion, rather than the Anglican or Church of England. Perhaps we may wonder whether, as Queen Elizabeth II holds the title of “Defender of the Faith and Supreme Governor of the Church of England”, the perceived British liberalism of the 1960s did not extend to satirisation of the religion of which their Queen was the figurehead. As we will see later in this work, it was not until 1994 that Anglican priests were considered appropriate comedy material.

As we have seen in *Oh Brother* and *All Gas and Gaiters*, sitcom writers of the 60s expanded settings for their comedies from the purely domestic to work settings, albeit religious ones. ITV were particularly adept at producing situation comedies which revolved around sundry work settings – *On The Buses*, which was set in a bus depot in the fictional town of Luxton, was first broadcast in 1969 and *Doctor in the House*, set in St. Swithins, a fictional London teaching hospital, first came to the TV screen in the same year. The introduction of regional areas into situation comedy was also spearheaded by ITV with sitcoms such as *Nearest and Dearest*, which revolved around “the fractious relationship between a brother and sister who inherit a pickle factory in Lancashire” (Wagg 9) and starred popular northern comedy actors Hylda Baker and Jimmy Jewel, or *The Likely Lads* – which was set in Newcastle upon Tyne and told the story of the unlikely friendship between quiet, conservative, middle class Bob (Rodney Bewes), and loud, bolshy, working class Terry (James Bolan).

⁹ www.dailymotion.com/video/x6csnw5 “Oh, Brother! By The Fleshpots” at 15mins 16secs.

We have spoken of sitcoms of the 60s sometimes conveying a sense of nostalgia for previous eras, and this is evident in one of the most popular situation comedies of this decade. *Dad's Army*, written by Jimmy Perry and David Croft, and first broadcast by the BBC in 1968, eventually comprised nine series, running until 1977. According to Tim Masters of BBC News, *Dad's Army* regularly attracted audiences of over eighteen million viewers ("Dad's Army: A Box Office Battle?", *BBC News*). Repeat episodes of this sitcom are still broadcast today and continue to be enjoyed by all generations. The setting for *Dad's Army* was the fictional village of Walmington-On-Sea and the action revolved around sundry characters - all members of the village's Home Guard.

Britain's Home Guard – also known as Dad's Army, hence the title of the sitcom, was set up in 1940, and was comprised of men between the ages of seventeen and sixty-five, who were unfit or ineligible for front-line military service. The Home Guard's mission was to man anti-aircraft guns during air raids by the Luftwaffe and protect and defend Britain in the event of a German invasion ("The Real 'Dad's Army'", *Imperial War Museum*). They were not paid and, as we will see in our analysis of the sitcom, were expected to continue carrying out their normal employment when not training. Initially, they lacked uniforms and weapons and would practice with broomsticks or golf clubs. Being that these were men who were too old, young or sufficiently physically fit for active service, they were often regarded with cynical amusement by the public. However, they took their role extremely seriously, and were more useful than is sometimes depicted, often spending all night manning anti-aircraft guns after a full days' work.

Dad's Army did not have one star character - each of the characters played an important role in the comedy action. The leader of the platoon, Captain Mainwaring (Arthur Lowe) was a bank manager, and his second-in-command Sergeant Wilson (John le Mesurier) was Mainwaring's chief bank clerk. The recurrent theme of comedy in class issues was present in the relationship between Mainwaring and Wilson. Although Mainwaring was the bank manager, he was acutely aware of the fact that he belonged to a lower social class than Wilson, who spoke and behaved with an aristocratic, languid air, and would often passively criticise Mainwaring's organisation of the platoon with the catchphrase, "Do you really think that's wise, Sir?"

Other members of the platoon included Corporal Jones (Clive Dunn), who was the local butcher and Private Frazer (John Laurie), the village undertaker. The comedy would not have been complete without the customary spiv, wheeler-dealer, Cockney character - Private Walker (James Beck). The youngest member of the platoon was Corporal Pike (Ian

Lavender) - a somewhat effeminate youngster whose mother always insisted he wore a woollen scarf so as not to catch cold. Although Pike himself was always blissfully unaware of the fact, the audience realised early in the first series that Sergeant Wilson, who lived with Pike and his mother and went by the title of “Uncle Arthur”, was in fact Pike’s father.

In the first chapter we saw the beginnings of the popularity of the sitcom catchphrase, which has continued to the present day, as we will see throughout this work. *Dad’s Army* had many catchphrases which caught the imagination of the viewers; Captain Mainwaring’s insult of “Stupid boy!” directed at Corporal Pike¹⁰, Private Frazer’s melancholic cry of “We’re doomed”¹¹ or Corporal Jones’ exhortation “Don’t panic”.¹²

Dad’s Army relies on circular narrative and slapstick comedy action to entertain viewers. Referring to the importance of the circular narrative in situation comedies, Philip Wickham argues that, “[b]y returning to the state of equilibrium at the end of each episode the text is signalling ... that the characters and situation will stay the same” (212), and acknowledges the comfort which this can bring to a viewing public who are often “trapped” in situations of their own from which they cannot escape, either personal, cultural or economic (Wickham 212). Each episode of *Dad’s Army* comprises a complete unit, and features laugh-out-loud comedy, as the platoon’s attempts at training and defence always disintegrate into chaos and calamity. Stephen Wagg believes that the popularity of *Dad’s Army* stems from the fact that “[t]here is ... a reassurance to be derived from situation comedies rooted in a social structure of the past, in which people do not look beyond their social positions and authority is undermined, not by deliberate subversion but by mounting, unintended chaos” (14).

On the 50th anniversary of the sitcom, the Radio Times magazine carried out a poll amongst readers to determine their favourite moments from all episodes; the public unanimously voting for a scene from an episode broadcast in 1973. The first episode of the sixth series was entitled “The Deadly Attachment”, and the comedy action revolved around the requirement for Mainwaring and his men to guard a captured German U-boat crew overnight. When Mainwaring compares Adolf Hitler to Charlie Chaplin in front of the captured German crew, the U-boat’s Captain declares that he is going to put Mainwaring’s name on his “list” of people who have annoyed him and who will be punished when Germany wins the war. Corporal Pike retaliates by singing a song calling Hitler a “twerp”,

¹⁰ www.youtube.com/watch?v=SuCIPAWDr2A “Dad’s Army: ‘You stupid boy’”.

¹¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7NIFWh7Sz8 “Doomed”.

¹² www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjxseHuUSYI “Don’t Panic”.

and is told by the German captain that his name will also go on the list. When the German captain asks Pike his name, Captain Mainwaring shouts out, “Don’t tell him, Pike!” The phrase, “Don’t tell him, Pike!” has become instantly recognisable in British popular culture.¹³

Despite the beginnings of second wave feminism, contraception, divorce and abortion laws, and movement towards the Equal Pay Act between sexes, which characterised 1960s Britain, primary female roles in sitcoms of the 60s were conspicuous by their absence. Because of their religious context, sitcoms such as *Oh Brother* and *All Gas and Gaiters* were exclusive to male actors, and although *Dad’s Army* occasionally featured female characters such as Corporal Pike’s mother Mavis, these were never in a primary role. Indeed, although Mr Mainwaring’s wife Elizabeth featured in many episodes, she never actually appeared on screen. Viewers’ perceptions of her as a difficult, domineering, unaffectionate woman were acquired through references made to her, and the telephone calls, usually instigated by Elizabeth, which took place between Mainwaring and his spouse.

The penultimate sitcom which we will mention in this perusal of the 60s, maintains this predilection for male characters. As stated in the first chapter, following their separation from Tony Hancock, *Hancock’s Half Hour* writers Ray Galton and Alan Simpson would consolidate their writing partnership with *Steptoe and Son*, first broadcast on BBC 1 in 1962. *Steptoe and Son* once again returned to the issue of social class and desire to better oneself, which had characterised Tony Hancock’s character in *Hancock’s Half Hour*. Albert Steptoe (Wilfrid Brambell) and his son Harold (Harry H. Corbett) are rag-and-bone men and as such, are firmly established within the social order as working class.

We see a combination of domesticity and work settings in this sitcom, as Albert and Harold live and work in their junkyard. Harold loathes his occupation and the lowliness of their existence, and dreams of living a sophisticated, upper-class life. His father Albert meanwhile appears to take delight in reminding Harold of their shared reality and the impossibility of his dreams. Harold’s clumsy attempts at RP speech are hampered by a tendency to drop his ‘h’s’, whilst Albert appears to purposely annoy his son by dropping every consonant possible. Hilary Dannenberg describes their relationship as “tormented” and posits that the dilapidated setting of their home and junkyard, “was often more reminiscent of a Beckett play than a standard sitcom domestic scenario” (175).

¹³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMVPXmaKds “Don’t tell him, Pike! – Dad’s Army 50th anniversary.

The circular narrative in *Steptoe and Son* follows a similar pattern in every episode; Harold tries to impress others whilst Albert insists on embarrassing his son at every opportunity; this is usually followed by Harold declaring he is going to move out in order to make something of himself, at which point Albert resorts to tears and pathos in order to ensure that his son will remain with him.

In an episode entitled “The Bath”, Harold enters to find Albert washing in a tin bath in the lounge. Harold complains that he has invited a prospective girlfriend, Delia, to come round for the evening, and tells his father to get out of the bath because, “it ain’t customary for a bird to meet a bloke’s father stuck in the bath”.¹⁴ The juxtaposition of the word “customary” with colloquial expressions such as “bird” and “bloke”, emphasises Harold’s struggle with his roots and his aspirations. In a reference to socio-cultural progress, Harold chastises his father for bathing in a tin bath in the lounge, telling him, “Other people don’t live like that anymore. Those days ‘as gone.”¹⁵ Whilst Harold nervously prepares for Delia’s arrival by putting on a clean, freshly pressed shirt and a bow tie, Albert sits in the bath eating pickled onions and washing his only set of underwear in the bath water.

Steptoe and Son is also a prime example of the use of pathos in situation comedy. Within the circular narrative and beneath the comedy, we see themes of loneliness and social isolation. Harold’s social class and occupation will ensure that he will never attain the social status he craves, and for all his bravado and annoying habits, Albert relies on Harold and is in reality petrified that his son will leave him alone to fend for himself. Wickham posits that “[c]omedy is more empathetic than sympathetic ... [A]udiences understand that the text can be read as light-hearted, even if in fact there is also serious or challenging content contained within it, while at the same time relating comic characters and situations from the diegesis to their own lives” (228).

As we will see in subsequent decades, the combination of comedy and serious content will prove a powerful tool for encouraging social commentary of difficult topics such as miscarriage or death.

We have spoken previously of much-loved sitcoms such as *Dad’s Army*, which harked back to previous eras and provided a sense of comfort and nostalgia during the hectic pace of the 60s. However, one sitcom was to portray an undesirable aspect of modern 1960s Britain, through the characterisation of right-wing, racist, sexist bigot, Alf Garnett. *Till Death Us Do Part*, written by Johnny Speight, was first broadcast in 1965 by the BBC,

¹⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyW4sjwkJ7c “Steptoe & Son ‘The Bath’” at 1min 3secs.

¹⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyW4sjwkJ7c “Steptoe & Son ‘The Bath’” at 1min 18secs.

continuing for ten years in a total of seven series. Although Alf Garnett was a Cockney, he was not the archetypal “lovable rogue”, but a foul-mouthed, opinionated individual, who worked on the London docks. Garnett (Warren Mitchell) was married to Elsie – known as Else – (Dandy Nichols) and they lived in Wapping, East London with their daughter Rita (Una Stubbs) and her husband Mike (Tony Booth). Alf had an opinion about everything – usually inaccurate and often outrageous - and when called to account by his family, would retaliate by verbally insulting them. Alf was a staunch working-class Tory, whilst his son-in-law Mike was a Socialist – their differing political views often providing some of the most incisive comedy moments. Alf was, however, no match for his family in these arguments; their ridicule of his political pontifications often reducing him to a quivering, indignant wreck, on the verge of tears.

In the characterisation of Alf’s wife Else, Johnny Speight used gender and class stereotyping in the portrayal of a working-class, sharp-tongued, apron-wearing housewife, with a scarf round her head and a cigarette almost permanently attached to her bottom lip. Their daughter Rita, however, exemplifies the younger generation of the 60s both in her appearance and her attitudes, which serve to accentuate the generation gap between herself and her mother.

When writing the scripts to *Till Death Us Do Part*, Speight would make use of current socio-cultural and political events, such as the debate on sex before marriage or the Vietnam War, as the background to specific episodes. As the series progressed into the 1970s, Speight included more nation-specific events, such as the 1973 marriage between the Queen’s only daughter Princess Ann, and Captain Mark Phillips, or the three-day week brought on by miners’ strikes in the same year.¹⁶ In the episode entitled “Three Day Week”, we see the beginning of female assertion when Else decides that if the rest of the country is working a three-day week, then she will follow suit, and therefore hasn’t prepared Alf’s dinner. Alf becomes apoplectic with rage and the following dialogue ensues:

ELSE: If everybody else can go on a three-day week, I don’t see why I shouldn’t.

What’s sauce for the goose, is sauce for the gander.

ALF (*shouting*) Look.....

ELSE: ‘An if everyone else can ‘ave days off, so can I.

¹⁶ The three-day week was an energy saving measure introduced by the Conservative government and is explained in detail in 3.3.

ALF: Look, what's all that larkin' about. Look, ne'er mind all that, I'm 'ungry. I've done 'ard days' work, an' I'm bloody 'ungry.

ELSE: (*nodding towards the kitchen*) Well, there's sem bread an' cheese out there.

ALF: (*incandescent with rage*) I don't wan' bread an' cheese. I wan' a 'ot dinner!

ELSE: Put some mustard on it!¹⁷

The sitcom's most controversial moments, however, can be found in Alf's opinions on immigration, and his derogatory, jaw-droppingly racist comments on ethnic minorities – in particular blacks, whom he refers to as “coons”.¹⁸ As was the case during the 60s, *Till Death Us Do Part* was filmed before a live studio audience, and after some of Garnett's most appalling comments, one sometimes wonders whether the audience are merely laughing or also gasping with shock. Even taking into account the historical context of this sitcom, many viewers today find this material extremely uncomfortable to watch. In 2007, Andy Medhurst would highlight the connection between the socio-cultural atmosphere of Britain in the 1960s, and Speight's outrageously racist scripts, when he referred to Alf Garnett as “that ambivalently monstrous Enoch Powell of the sitcom” (38).

It should go without saying that Johnny Speight's intention in the writing of *Till Death Us Do Part* was that Garnett himself should be the butt of all the jokes, and that the audience would understand that the script was written from an ironical perspective and was intended to highlight discrimination and racism rather than promote it. Unfortunately, given the discriminatory, uninclusive era in which the show was televised, many people who enjoyed the series actually agreed with Garnett's preposterous pontifications, and sadly did not perceive the irony. Warren Mitchell himself recalled a meeting with a fellow football fan who congratulated him for “having a go at the immigrants”, to which Mitchell retorted, “Actually, we're having a go at idiots like you” (“Warren Mitchell obituary: Alf Garnett and much more”, *BBC News*).

It is a testament to Warren Mitchell's acting talent that the character of Alf Garnett came to be forever connected with Mitchell in the public consciousness, as Mitchell's real-life personality was as far removed from Alf Garnett as it was possible to be. In later years, he would often appear on chat shows in Alf's persona, although with toned-down language

¹⁷ www.dailymotion.com/video/x7y8oa7 “Till Death Us Do Part – Three Day Week”.

¹⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=5z584iybkcy “A surplus of coons! Class & Race in UK Comedy” - this excerpt contains sensitive material.

and offering opinions on football and wine, rather than immigration. When Johnny Speight died of pancreatic cancer in 1998, Warren Mitchell decided that his alter ego should also be laid to rest and made no further appearances as Alf Garnett. (“Johnny Speight – In Profile”, *British Classic Comedy*). As may be expected, in contrast to the continued popularity of *Dad’s Army*, repeat episodes of *Till Death Us Do Part* are not included in today’s broadcasting schedules.

In our section on the decade of the 60s, we have examined the excitement and dynamism of Britain’s evolving cultural climate of the era, and the extent to which sitcom writing was influenced by this bright, new world. However, a new decade was beckoning in which this optimistic, exhilarating mood would change, and the economy would suffer greatly.

3.3. Britain in the 1970s – The Nation Crumbles

If the 1960s had been a decade full of hope and exciting possibilities, the 1970s could not have been more different. Those remembering the 70s today speak of mass unemployment, striking public sector workers, power cuts, and a three-day week. However, at the beginning of the 70s, unemployment was still low and Britain’s economy was booming. We will now examine Britain’s passage through the 70s, and the events which brought the nation to its knees.

On 29th May 1970, women’s struggle for pay equality, championed by the women machinists at Ford Dagenham (see 3.1.), came to fruition when the Equal Pay Act was passed, preventing discriminatory pay between men and women. Although in theory this would ensure women would be paid the same as men for carrying out the same job, as we will see later in this work, in practice this is still an issue some fifty years later.

Second wave feminists during the 70s fought for women’s rights, equal pay and equal opportunities. The numbers of women working outside the home increased during this decade, although women’s employment opportunities were somewhat limited, as most women were still expected to continue fulfilling their domestic duties. Attending to the home, husband, and children had always been and remained, the female preserve thus adding to women’s responsibilities.

During the decade, Women’s Liberation movement protests became more militant and often focused on the objectification of women. In November 1970, a group of feminists stormed the stage of the Royal Albert Hall during the Miss World pageant, to protest

against a contest in which women were judged solely on their physical appearance.¹⁹ Other Women's Lib protests were aimed at female topless modelling and prostitution. In 1970, *The Sun* newspaper began publishing daily pictures of topless models on Page 3 of the tabloid. Women's Liberation members decried this perceived objectification of women; however, models such as Linda Lusardi, Samantha Fox or Katie Price declared that they were adults who engaged in topless modelling as a career choice and were well rewarded financially. Interestingly, the Page 3 topless model continued until as recently as 2015, when the newspaper quietly desisted from this tradition, which had persisted for more than forty years.

The General Election of June 1970 saw the Conservative party returned to power with a thirty-seat majority, under Prime Minister Edward Heath. The period of Heath's mandate would prove extremely challenging, both for the government and the general public. One member of Heath's Cabinet would become a force to reckon with in British politics – Margaret Thatcher was offered the post of Secretary of State for Education and Science. The following year, Thatcher terminated a free school milk programme for children, which had been in place since 1944, and earned herself the dubious title of “Thatcher the milk snatcher”. As we will see, in the course of her political career, Thatcher would not only earn herself another nickname, but would almost single-handedly change the face of British politics.

On the 6th of February 1971, gunner Robert Curtis was the first British soldier to be killed by the IRA (Irish Republican Army) in Northern Ireland (“Northern Ireland Timeline: 1970s”, *alpha history*). British troops had first been sent to Northern Ireland to restore law and order between Catholics and Protestants in 1969. This period of Northern Ireland's history from the late 1960s until the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, is known as The Troubles (“What You Need To Know About the Troubles”, *Imperial War Museum*). The Northern Ireland conflict would spill over the borders into mainland Britain, as we will see later in this work.

Although the decision had been taken by the Labour government, it was under Edward Heath's Conservative government that on 15th February 1971, decimalisation took place, and the British currency system changed overnight from 240d (old pence) in the pound, to 100p (new pence). Apart from the confusion surrounding this strange new coinage, people were also worried that decimalisation would be the perfect excuse to raise prices without

¹⁹ www.bbc.com/news/av/magazine-26437815 “Miss World: My protest at 1970 beauty pageant”.

the public realising. However, as inflation rocketed during the 70s, prices rose anyway, regardless of decimalisation.

On 15th January 1972 – now known as Bloody Sunday – British soldiers fired on a group of 15,000 protesters on a march in Derry in Northern Ireland and killed fourteen people. The march had been organised as a protest against detention without trial. This marked a devastating turning point in the Troubles, and in July of the same year the IRA retaliated; killing nine people and injuring more than a hundred, in a series of bombings in Belfast; the day became known as Bloody Friday. The following day, the *Belfast Telegraph* reported, “[t]his city has not experienced such a day of death and destruction since the German blitz of 1941” (“Bloody Friday”, *CAIN*).

On 4th August 1972, the Ugandan President Idi Amin gave Uganda’s Asian population ninety days to leave the country. Over half of them came to Britain, and many of them settled there permanently. Sadly, they also often suffered racism and social isolation in their adopted nation.

Britain’s long-awaited entry into the Common Market - or European Economic Community – EEC - took place on 1st January 1973. Thus began Britain’s fractious relationship with today’s European Union. Denmark and Ireland would also join the EEC on the same date.²⁰ In 1975, Harold Wilson’s Labour government would hold a referendum on whether Britain should remain a member of the EEC. An overwhelming 67.2% voted to remain in the Economic Community. As we will see later, a further referendum would be held in 2016, and would divide the nation.

The IRA’s bombing campaign aimed at civilians on mainland Britain began on 8th March 1973 and continued throughout the 70s and into the 80s. On this particular day, members of the Irish Republican Army planned to set off bombs at well-known locations in central London. One bomb exploded at the Old Bailey and another at the Ministry of Agriculture, although planned explosions at New Scotland Yard and the headquarters of the British Forces Broadcasting System were thwarted, and the bombs defused. The months of September and December 1973 also saw blasts occur at two central London railway stations, Kings Cross and Euston, and a car bomb was detonated outside the Home Office.

Following the Yom Kippur war, which took place in October 1973 between Israel, and Egyptian and Syrian forces, the oil giant OPEC halted supplies to the West, causing oil

²⁰ When nineteen EU members adopted the Euro in 2002, Britain and Denmark opted out and retained their own currency.

prices to quadruple. Large companies began making many workers redundant and unemployment rose, as did consumer costs, causing Britain's economy to falter badly. This national crisis was exacerbated by the National Union of Mineworkers' threat of an all-out strike. Heath's government's solution to the possibility of a national coal shortage was to introduce the "three-day-week", whereby consumption of electricity would be restricted. This led to sporadic electricity cuts, which affected commercial premises, offices, industry, and private homes, although hospitals, supermarkets, and newspaper printing presses were exempt. From 1st January to 7th March 1974, depending on the time range of the electricity cuts, the British public would alternate between shopping, working, relaxing, or eating by candle or torchlight.²¹ However, as during the Second World War, the British "blitz spirit" took hold and, although many homes were without power for nine hours a day, people supported and helped one another. On 24th January 1974, the National Union of Mineworkers voted to strike, and an official strike began on 5th February.

Believing that the nation was behind him in his dispute with the miners, and that the Conservatives would secure a majority vote, Edward Heath called a snap election for 28th February. However, his beliefs were mistaken, and the election resulted in a hung Parliament. Although Heath attempted to form a coalition government with the Liberal Party, his advances were rejected, and Harold Wilson was forced to form a minority Labour government. In October of the same year, Wilson called another election and secured a majority of three seats.

Following the Conservative defeat in this election, many Tories withdrew their support for Edward Heath as leader of the Conservative Party, giving rise to a leadership contest. In the first ballot, a surprise win for Margaret Thatcher led to Edward Heath retiring from the contest, being replaced by William Whitelaw. Thatcher won 52% of the second ballot and became Leader of the Conservative Party. She appointed William Whitelaw deputy party leader, and in 1979 Whitelaw became Home Secretary in Margaret's first Cabinet ("Lord Whitelaw dies at 81 after long illness", *The Irish Times*).

The IRA's terrorist campaign on mainland Britain continued throughout 1974 and beyond. On 17th June, a bomb exploded at the Houses of Parliament, injuring eleven people, and one month later another explosion at the Tower of London killed one person and injured many others. Then shortly before Christmas, the IRA struck once again at the heart of London, when a car bomb exploded outside Selfridges in Oxford Street. Although

²¹ www.bbc.com.uk/sounds/play/p01nmypc - "Life was turned upside down by the three-day week".

security and emergency services received a telephone warning, nine people were injured in the explosion.

However, the highest-profile victim of the IRA during this decade was Lord Louis Mountbatten, the Queen's cousin, Prince Philip's maternal uncle, and Prince Charles' godfather and mentor ("What You Need To Know About the Troubles", *Imperial War Museum*). On 27th August 1979, whilst on holiday with his family in the Republic of Ireland, Mountbatten and his family were targeted by the IRA whilst on a boat trip. Mountbatten was killed instantly, as was his fourteen-year-old grandson Nicholas, whilst the boy's grandmother died the following day from injuries sustained in the blast ("The IRA Assassination of Lord Mountbatten: Facts and Fallout", *History*). Lord Mountbatten was a popular member of the Royal family and public figure, and his assassination shocked the nation.

The Race Relations Act was passed in 1976, effectively making it illegal to discriminate against someone on the grounds of race, clarified as "colour, race, nationality, or ethnic or national origins" ("Race Relations Act 1976", *The National Archives*). Although an obvious step forward in Britain's multicultural society, this Act was not always adhered to in practice, particularly in the context of employment, where prospective employees were often judged on their colour rather than their qualifications. Later in this work, we will examine whether, half a century later, this situation has improved or not.

On 16th March 1976, Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced his resignation. Although never confirmed, there have been claims that he was suffering from the early onset of Alzheimer's disease. Barely one month later, James Callaghan took over from Wilson as Prime Minister. Callaghan's mandate would prove contentious and complicated and would last a little over three years, taking in the nation's most difficult period since the end of the Second World War.

A few months after Callaghan succeeded Harold Wilson, an economic crisis forced the Labour government to request aid from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, in return the IMF demanded that government spending should be cut.

In a trying decade, 1977 became a year for celebration when Queen Elizabeth II celebrated twenty-five years on the throne. The British public toasted the Queen's Silver Jubilee with street parties throughout Britain, and London Transport commemorated this auspicious occasion by inaugurating a new Underground Line – the Jubilee Line.

On 25th July 1978, the world's first "test-tube" baby, Louise Brown, was born in Oldham. On the fortieth anniversary of this miracle birth, the Science Museum in London

opened an exhibition entitled, “IVF: Six Million Babies Later”, which aimed to celebrate the innovation, and the families who have benefitted from IVF. Today, Louise Brown is married and is the proud mother of two sons.

Following on from the increased permissiveness of the 60s, during the 1970s sex became a saleable commodity and was everywhere. Songs such as Rod Stewart’s “Tonight’s the Night” (1976),²² or Johnny Bristol’s “Hang On In There Baby” (1974)²³ glorified loss of virginity, whilst films such as *Saturday Night Fever* featured casual sex scenes in which a girl (Annette) had sex with several boys on the back seat of a car. This led to a culture whereby women who initiated intimacy were then expected to engage in full intercourse, which in turn led to an increase in numbers of rape victims. Feminist campaigns against male sexual violence originated in 1977, when female protesters marched by torchlight through the streets of Britain in a campaign known as “Reclaim the Night” (“Why Reclaim the Night?” *Reclaim the Night*). These marches still take place annually to this day, and are replicated in other countries such as Italy, Germany or the United States.

The winter of 1978-79 would go down in history as “the winter of discontent”. Callaghan’s government’s attempts to drive down inflation by restricting wage rises, led to a wave of punishing public sector strikes which affected the whole of British society. According to Tara Martin, “In the frigid winter of 1978-1979, British workers, from nurses to car workers to gravediggers, staged a series of more than two thousand strikes against statutory wage limits” (49). During this difficult period, rubbish lay uncollected in the streets, mourners were turned away from cemeteries, and strikes by National Health Service workers caused severe disruption in hospitals.

On 28th March 1979, James Callaghan lost a vote of ‘no confidence’ in the House of Commons by one vote, and a General Election was called for 3rd May. The Conservative’s election slogan was “Labour isn’t working”, and Thatcher’s election manifesto included promises to cut income tax, reduce public spending, increase opportunities for home ownership, and curb the power of the unions. In *The Path To Power*, Margaret herself stated that the general consensus prior to the election was that, “now ... we could and should obtain a mandate to clip the wings of the trade union militants” (435). The Tories

²² www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZr6AE-u2uM “Rod Stewart – Tonight’s The Night (Gonna Be Alright)” (Official Video).

²³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVdzN1axrW8 “Johnny Bristol – Hang On In There Baby”.

won the Election with a majority of forty-three seats, and Margaret Thatcher became Britain's first female Prime Minister.

The 1970s were years of economic instability, uncertainty, and unrest. The British public were once again required to demonstrate their resilience, in a decade in which rising unemployment, public sector strikes, electricity cuts, and the constant threat of IRA terrorist attacks were predominant. Advances that we have mentioned such as the Equal Pay Act (1970) or the Race Relations Act (1976) were important steps towards a society in which inequality and discrimination would in theory become obsolete, but as we have seen, these laws were not always put into practice. During the 1970s, the brightness of the previous decade was overshadowed by dark storm clouds, and society as a whole became darker as a result. Violence became more prevalent; pickets would clash violently with police during strike action, an upsurge in football hooliganism afforded the British football fans an adverse reputation both at home and abroad, and a rise in domestic violence led to a necessity for Women's Refuges and Victim Support (Morgan, 10). Kenneth O. Morgan sums up the decade of the 1970s with the phrase, "Britain seemed a more uncomfortable place in which to live a normal life" (11).

We will now examine whether this new, unstable, darker society would be reflected in 1970s sitcoms, or whether sitcom writers would concentrate on tried and tested formats, in order to provide the viewing public with humorous respite from the trials and tribulations of 1970s Britain.

3.4. Television Sitcoms in the 1970s – Insults, Intolerance, and Ire

The decade of the 1970s saw the continuation of popular sitcoms of the 1960s, together with the advent of many new arrivals; some of which would fade from the viewers' collective memory, whilst others would become television screen classics. Many viewers also began to enjoy the advantages of colour television during the 1970s, and by 1976, there were more colour television sets in Britain than black and white ("The story of colour television in Britain", *Science and Media Museum*).

The 1970s witnessed the introduction of the first openly gay sitcom character, Mr Humphries, in BBC 1's *Are You Being Served*, written by Jeremy Lloyd and David Croft, and first broadcast in 1972. *Are You Being Served* was set in the fictional department store of Grace Brothers, and featured a host of stereotypical characters. This television offering continued with the ubiquitous circular narrative, which centred round the lives of the staff

working at the store. Being that, as was the case with most situation comedies of the time, the show was filmed before a live studio audience, the sets rarely changed and all the scenes were set inside the store, on the floor which housed both the menswear and ladieswear departments. The menswear department was run by Captain Peacock (Frank Thornton), an ex-army captain; a stickler for discipline and organisation, who despairs at the antics of his staff. Mr Humphries (John Inman) was the camp, senior assistant of the menswear department, whilst his junior assistant Mr Lucas (Trevor Bannister), was the cheeky young Cockney character with an eye for the ladies.

The female characters were also firmly on the spectrum of stereotype, although at opposite extremes. Miss Brahms (Wendy Richard), the ladieswear junior assistant was a buxom, dizzy blonde, whilst Mrs Slocombe (Mollie Sugden) was the haughty head of the ladieswear department, who lived alone with her beloved cat, whom she referred to as her “pussy”. Although other characters were comfortable within their social class, Mrs Slocombe had delusions of grandeur, and insisted on speaking in a faux upper-class accent which only lasted until she failed to concentrate, at which point she would revert to her own working-class speech pattern. Andy Medhurst states that, “Mrs Slocombe’s aspirations to gentility ... are capsized by the continual resurfacing of her working-class vulgarity” (146).

Other characters included the doddery owner of the department store, who although in his eighties was known as “the young Mr Grace” (Harold Bennett), the store manager Mr Rumbold (Nicholas Smith), and the store caretaker Mr Harman (Arthur English). As befitted the era, both junior and senior staff addressed each other by their titles and surnames, rather than their Christian names.

The verbal comedy in *Are You Being Served* focused mainly on sexual innuendo and one-liners.²⁴ Andy Medhurst describes the sitcom as “an unapologetic assemblage of puns, innuendo, slapstick, increasingly bizarre costumes, and a series of dance routines or fashion shows which turned the department store into a pantomime stage” (103).

Catchphrases from the series also became recognisable in popular British culture, such as Mr Humphries cry of “I’m free!” on being asked if anyone were available to attend to a customer, or the *double entendre* of the running gag of Mrs Slocombe’s “pussy”.

One of the writers of *Are You Being Served* was David Croft, who was also writing *Dad’s Army* at the time. This led to both sitcoms following a similar narrative pattern,

²⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XjsJ2A2DME “Best Innuendoes and One-Liners – Are You Being Served?”

whereby the episode would begin with a situation of stability and status quo, and terminate in mayhem and hilarity. Both sitcoms also used an equal measure of verbal and visual comedy, which greatly appealed to the British viewers' sense of humour.

Although nowhere as outrageous as *Till Death Us Do Part*, *Are You Being Served* was also sometimes criticised for containing insensitive material masquerading under the title of comedy. Inman's effeminate Mr Humphries, although loved by millions and arguably one of the best-loved characters of the sitcom, was also lambasted by many in the militant gay community who were offended by his stereotypical portrayal of the limp-wristed, mincing homosexual (Medhurst, 88).

An episode entitled "German Week"²⁵ which was broadcast in 1975, reflected Britain's new role as part of the European Economic Community, but also featured humour at the expense of the German race which some might today consider inappropriate, an issue which will be addressed further later in this section. In the context of the 1970s however, the sitcom was extremely popular, and we may argue that the visual comedy of the "Schuhplatter" dance, which the staff of Grace Brothers perform in honour of "German Week", ensures that the audience's laughter is directed at the sitcom characters and cast rather than the German nation.²⁶

Britain's entry into the EEC was also reflected in a sitcom first broadcast by ITV in 1977 entitled *Mind Your Language*, set in a fictional adult education college in London. Jeremy Brown (Barry Evans) was the teacher charged with teaching English to a group of foreign students. Most of the humour was verbal and derived from misunderstandings or "false friends" between languages. However, the series relied on stereotypical characterisations of nationalities – the suave, mustachioed Spaniard, Juan Cervantes (Ricardo Montez), or the dirndl-clad, braided-haired German *fräulien*, Anna Schmidt (Jacki Harding). At a time when the world was becoming increasingly globalised, and Britain Europeanised, it was deemed that these characterisations could prove offensive, and therefore after three series the decision was taken by Michael Grade, deputy controller at ITV, to axe the sitcom which he considered promoted ethnic stereotyping.

It is interesting that, in a decade which was marked by an increase in domestic and sexual violence within society, BBC 1 began to broadcast two sitcoms which would

²⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Oxw0nX6R2g "Are You Being Served – German Week".

²⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=SshxvD_kyq4 "The Staff Are Forced to Perform the Schuhplatter - Are You Being Served?"

become extremely popular – both featuring infantilised male main characters. *Terry and June*, written by John Kane, was first broadcast in 1974 and would continue for thirteen years. Terry Medford (Terry Scott) and his wife June (June Whitfield) lived happily in middle-class suburbia, and unlike characters from the 60s sitcoms such as Anthony Aloysius St John Hancock or Harold Steptoe, were neither bothered by class issues nor felt the need to climb further up the social ladder. However, this lack of class conflict proved a problem as far as the scripts were concerned, because it limited the comedy scope of the sitcom, so the humour was found in Terry’s desire for promotion at work. Therefore, although Terry was not aiming higher socially, he was doing so professionally. Episodes tended to revolve around Terry’s attempts to impress his boss Sir Dennis (Reginald Marsh), which of course would never go smoothly. Terry’s crassness and clumsiness contrasted with June’s infinite patience with her “man-child” husband. As Terry crashed through life causing havoc, June would smile benignly and occasionally admonish her husband’s childish behaviour.

Despite the fact that the British viewing public felt a certain tenderness towards Terry and his saintly spouse June, it was another infantile male character whom they would take straight to their hearts during the 70s. *Some Mothers Do ‘Ave ‘Em* was also a sitcom with a domestic setting and featured hopelessly hapless Frank Spencer (Michael Crawford) and his long-suffering wife Betty (Michelle Dotrice). Written by Raymond Allen and first broadcast on BBC 1 in 1973, *Some Mothers Do ‘Ave ‘Em* was one of the first sitcoms to experiment with seriality in narrative, albeit combined with circular narrative. Each episode would feature the long-standing format whereby a stable situation would become increasingly unstable and chaotic; however, rather than forming a complete circular narrative, the episode would often end at the moment of maximum chaos. Episodes all revolved around the fact that wherever Frank Spencer ventured, mayhem and destruction resulted.²⁷ Seriality was introduced into the sitcom through the story line of Betty’s pregnancy and the birth of Frank and Betty’s daughter Jessica. In an era when fathers were still not particularly implicated in the care of their children, scenes featuring Frank tenderly looking after his daughter became increasingly popular.²⁸

Although mainly filmed before a studio audience, *Some Mothers Do ‘Ave ‘Em* was

²⁷ www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQG4CFsmixs “The Toilet – Some Mothers Do ‘Ave ‘Em”.

²⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=tiwEdR2mpvM “I Spy With My Little Eye”.

instrumental in showcasing the possibilities of exterior filming on location. Michael Crawford was eager to introduce increasingly complicated stunts into the scripts, and would also insist on carrying out these stunts himself rather than using a stunt double. Often these acrobatic antics would form the climax of the show and were eagerly awaited by the viewers. One of these stunts, in which Frank goes rollerskating to impress Betty and her nieces, is regarded as the most physically audacious of the era.²⁹ During the 70s, the character of Frank Spencer became one of the most universally adored of the sitcom world, and his catchphrases – “Ooooooh Betty!” or “The cat’s done a whoopsy in my beret” the most repeated. Frank would also become the most imitated sitcom character of the decade, both by professional impersonators and the general public.

Attempts to reflect Britain’s multicultural society also continued throughout the 70s. In 1974 ITV first broadcast *Rising Damp*, a sitcom set in a seedy boarding house, comprised of dank and grimy bedsits, and lorded over by Mr Rigsby (Leonard Rossiter) the landlord. The unsavoury nature of the bedsits which he managed, was reflected in Rigsby’s appearance; thin, with lank, greasy hair and a weasely countenance. Rigsby’s tenants included an extremely well-spoken, middle-class young black man, Philip (Don Warrington) who shared a bedsit with Alan (Richard Beckinsale), a young medical student, and Ruth Jones (Frances de la Tour) a college administrator and a spinster. Despite the fact that his clothes are grubby and full of holes whilst Philip is smartly, though casually dressed, Rigsby is convinced of his racial superiority. In an episode entitled “Stage Struck”, on being asked by Philip, “What’s wrong with a cultural evening once in a while? Rigsby retorts, “Listen ‘oo’s talking – before you came ‘ere your idea of a cultural evening was running around with someone’s ‘ead on a pole”. The combination of the cultured timbre of Philip’s voice and smart appearance, and Rigsby’s working class accent and threadbare clothes, serve to enhance the irony of the landlord’s racist attitudes and remarks.³⁰ The scripts allowed Philip to take advantage of Rigsby’s ignorance by convincing him that he is an African prince and the son of an African tribal chief, rather than a second-generation, middle-class black man from Croydon. Furthermore, the characterisation of Rigsby showcased the reality of narrow-minded preconceptions towards black British citizens, which unfortunately were still visible within society. During the

²⁹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFLpwRMS00g “Rollerskating – Some Mothers Do ‘Ave ‘Em”.

³⁰ www.imdb.com/video/vi1804123417?playlistId=tt0071041&ref_=tt_ov_vi “Rising Damp - Stage Struck” at 0mins 15secs.

1970s, many second-generation black Britains regularly complained that on being asked where they came from, and replying “Britain”, they would then be asked, “Yes, but where do you *really* come from?”

Through a combination of shrewd scripts and Leonard Rossiter’s talent, the audience became aware of the pathos beneath Rigsby’s claim of racial and intellectual superiority. At the point where viewers would judge him to be most dislikeable, a comment or a look would show the reality of his lonely, socially isolated existence. Even his unrequited love and sexual interest in Ruth Jones is not reciprocated – Miss Jones preferring suave, sophisticated, sexually attractive Philip. In a reference to art imitating reality, Wickham argues that, “While the situation is mined for comic effect, its sadness and resonance is understood through the audience’s own experiences and becomes a vicarious form of consolation” (268).

Rising Damp was one of the first sitcoms to feature a black actor in a primary role, and furthermore to move away from stereotypical portrayals of blacks, although in order to do so the script writer Eric Chapell made use of stereotypical white racist attitudes as a source of humour.

Another of ITV’s portrayals of multicultural Britain during this decade, was *Love Thy Neighbour*, which was first broadcast in 1971. This sitcom also had a domestic setting, in which the comedy action revolved around the love/hate relationship between two couples – one white and one black. Eddie Booth (Jack Smethurst) and his wife Joan (Kate Williams) live next door to Bill (Rudolph Walker) and Barbie (Nina Baden-Semper) Reynolds. Eddie is a racist, uneducated, working-class Northerner, whilst Bill is middle-class and educated. In the pilot episode for the series, Eddie goes next door to welcome his new neighbours and mistakes the removal man, who is white, for his new neighbour. Bill corrects Eddie’s mistake by introducing himself, at which point the action cuts straight back to Eddie’s house, where he is on the phone to the Race Relations Board, and the following one-sided dialogue takes place:

EDDIE: Is that the Race Relations board? I wish to make a complaint. Pardon? Am I coloured? Yes, white all over, and proud of it! I wish to make a complaint against a nig-nog³¹. Pardon? Oh, very well, a coloured gentleman then. What’s he done? He’s moved next door, that’s what he’s

³¹ A derogatory, racist term, used to refer to a black person, which is totally unacceptable in contemporary society.

done! What do you mean is that all? I beg your pardon – I am not bigotted. Just you wait mate, till one of them moves next door to you. You’ll soon change your tune when the tom-toms start! Pardon? Oh, oh I’m sorry! Well how did *I* know you’re coloured – you don’t *sound* black!

On being told to calm down by his wife, Eddie exclaims that he wouldn’t feel safe living next to a black couple, and tells Joan, “You could get raped in the night”. Even taking into account the historical context of the sitcom, it is difficult to envisage how this line of the script could even be broadcast.

These first scenes set the premise for the whole eight series - broadcasting until 1976. Writers Vince Powell and Harry Driver would use a similar format to that used by Johnny Speight in *Till Death Us Do Part*, in the portrayal of the opinionated, bigoted, white individual. However, in the case of *Love Thy Neighbour*, black characters were not only primary characters, but as was Philip in *Rising Damp*, Bill and Barbie Reynolds are not only clearly better educated and of a higher social class than their white neighbours, but also significantly more attractive.

Much of the comedic material in *Love Thy Neighbour* derived from racial insults, which Eddie and Bill throw at each other. In the pilot episode, on being quizzed by Barbie as to what he has called Eddie in retaliation for Eddie’s insult of “Sambo”, Bill replies that he has called Eddie, “a loud-mouth, white-skinned poof”. Interestingly, although Eddie’s insults towards Bill centre on his race, Bill retaliates by calling into question Eddie’s sexuality. As a couple, in contrast to Eddie and Joan’s homeliness and lack of sexual allure, Bill and Barbie exude sensuality and exoticism in a characterisation which gives prominence to the theme of black masculinity equating with sexual prowess.

Barbie and Joan are the antithesis of their respective partners; becoming very good friends and constantly chiding Bill and Eddie for their intolerance towards each other.

Love Thy Neighbour has often been described as “controversial” and “racist”; however, at this point in our journey, it may be interesting to contrast two opinions on the acceptability of this undoubtedly successful sitcom. In a 2018 interview on ITV’s *This Morning*, on being asked about claims of racist material being used as comedy, actor Rudolph Walker, who played Bill Reynolds in the series, said the following – “It was for pure entertainment. It wasn’t meant to solve the problem of racism at all. If you could solve it in a half-hour programme then there wouldn’t be racism at all” (“Rudolph Walker defends Love Thy Neighbour”, *Female First*). Our second opinion is that of writer Caryl

Phillips who in a 2009 interview, spoke of the fact that British society of the era “reinforced stereotypes ... Every black kid had the experience of going to school and people calling them a nignog, because that’s what was said on the TV last night and the black characters laughed, so what’s your problem, pal?” (Caryl Phillips, interview with Stephen Moss, *The Guardian*).

Perhaps we may posit that these differing opinions could be generational. Although both Walker and Phillips were born in the Caribbean, Walker left Trinidad for Britain in 1960, at the age of twenty, whilst Phillips was born in St. Kitts and arrived in Britain as a four-month-old babe-in-arms. It would appear that although Walker, who was an adult when he arrived in Britain, considers sitcoms such as *Love Thy Neighbour* to be simply entertaining, Phillips, who grew up in Britain, recognises the negative and hurtful effect which these “entertaining” sitcoms could generate. Phillips believes that his generation was more vocal when faced with racism and discrimination. As we will see in section 4.1., those belonging to Phillips’ generation would rebel against racial discrimination during the 1980s, when tensions between black youngsters and the police force would lead to riots in several British cities.

We will bring the “golden age” of the British sitcom to an end with a sitcom which Stephen Wagg refers to as “the most politically ambitious sitcom of the 1970s...” (20). *Fawlty Towers*, written by John Cleese and Connie Booth, was first broadcast in 1975 on BBC 2 and comprised merely twelve episodes, divided into two series. Despite this, *Fawlty Towers* has acquired cult status within British sitcom history and has been exported to other countries such as Finland, Germany, and Spain.

Fawlty Towers was a fictional hotel in the British seaside town of Torquay, run by the irascible Basil Fawlty (John Cleese) and his domineering wife Sybil (Prunella Scales). Basil and Sybil’s main employees are Polly (Connie Booth), who carries out the duties of waitress and chambermaid, the Cockney chef Terry (Brian Hall), and Manuel the Spanish waiter (Andrew Sachs).

Permanent residents of the hotel include stereotypical characters such as Miss Tibbs (Gilly Flower) and Miss Gatsby (Renee Roberts), elderly spinsters who always address Basil as “Mr Fawlty” and appear to be rather fond of their host. However, Basil’s unstable personality leads to him alternating between insincere charm and absolute rudeness in his conversational exchanges with them. In the characterisation of Basil, constantly on the brink of a screaming fit of rage, we may perhaps perceive a reflection of the anger and unrest which was prevalent in certain sectors of British society during the decade.

The other permanent resident is Major Gowen (Ballard Berkeley), an ex-army Major who, as mentioned in 2.2., was Cleese and Booth's reincarnation of Colonel Chinstrap from the war-time radio show "It's That Man Again". As befits his military rank, Major Gowen addresses Basil by his surname, and possesses an infallible capacity for interpreting every enquiry as an offer of an alcoholic beverage, to which he always answers, "I don't mind if I do, Fawlty".

John Cleese's brilliant portrayal of Basil depicts an inherently dislikeable, frustrated individual, constantly belittled and criticised by his intimidating wife. Their relationship is never affectionate, and Basil's pet names for Sybil include "my little piranha fish", "my little nest of vipers", or "my little Kommandant". Cleese and Booth's scripts relied on the traditional circular narrative, although as with sitcoms such as *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*, the end of each episode often coincided with the climax of chaotic action. Comedic content was both verbal and visual, with an overriding note of sarcasm in the verbal, and slapstick in the visual comedy. Many episodes also featured a hint of the French farce; plots were fast-paced and often involved chasing and running through doorways.

The first ever episode reverted to a favourite comedic topic and was entitled "A Touch of Class".³² In an attempt to improve the class of clientele who frequent the establishment, Basil has placed an advertisement in *Country Life* magazine. The script introduces the theme of class-snobbishness in Basil's treatment of two new guests at the hotel. Mr Brown is a casually dressed Cockney who drives a white sports car, and is treated with disdain and contempt by Basil, even though the newcomer addresses Manuel in fluent Spanish. In contrast Lord Melbury, an aristocrat, is fawned over constantly by Basil, who believes that his plan to attract a higher-class clientele has been successful, and happily cashes "His Lordship" a cheque for two hundred pounds.

When Polly warns Fawlty that "Lord Melbury" is actually a confidence trickster who is being followed by Mr Brown, in reality an undercover police officer, Basil initially disbelieves her, calling Mr Brown "a Cockney git", and declaring that Lord Melbury must be genuine because he is upper-class. Basil's humiliation is complete when he realises that the briefcase of valuables that Melbury has deposited in the hotel safe is actually full of bricks. As chaos ensues, and the trickster is chased through the hotel by police officers, Basil vents his anger by insulting Melbury loudly and attempting to kick him once he has been restrained by the police.

³² www.dailymotion.com/video/x7low1n "A Touch of Class".

Following in the tradition of writers such as Johnny Speight (*Till Death Us Do Part*), Eric Chapell (*Rising Damp*), or Vince Powell and Harry Driver (*Love Thy Neighbour*), Cleese and Booth also addressed issues such as race, through comedic irony and “the comedy of embarrassment” (Wickham, 280). In contrast to how he perceives himself, the viewers are aware that Basil is sadly lacking in social skills such as politeness, consideration or empathy, and furthermore has no sense of propriety. In an episode entitled “The Germans”, Basil welcomes a group of German tourists to the hotel. Fawlty is suffering from concussion, and although taking every opportunity to advise everyone else not to mention the war, ignores his own advice and mentions it constantly. When taking the German guests’ lunch order, and having just affirmed that the war is now over and therefore should be forgotten, the following dialogue takes place:

BASIL: So, it’s all forgotten now, so let’s hear no more about it. So that’s two egg
mayonnaise, a prawn Goebbels, a Hermann Göring, and four Colditz
salads. No, sorry, I got a bit confused here. I got a bit confused because
everyone keeps mentioning the war. What’s the matter?

GERMAN GUEST: (*comforting female guest*) It’s all right.

BASIL: Is there something wrong?

GERMAN GUEST: Will you stop talking about the war?

BASIL: Me? *You* started it.

GERMAN GUEST: We did *not* start it!

BASIL: Yes, you did! You invaded Poland!³³

The scene ends with Basil imitating Hitler, by goosestepping in and out of the dining room, and calling one of the horrified German guests a “stupid Kraut”.

Although when broadcast before a live audience the scene generated a spontaneous round of applause, we must not interpret this as a sign of the audience’s acquiescence with Basil’s racist diatribe, but rather an appreciation of the visual and verbal humour through which the character of Basil was being used to ridicule the retrograde attitudes of certain sectors of the British public towards their German neighbours. Furthermore, Basil’s exaggerated goosestepping was a nod to Cleese’s earlier career with fellow members of Monty Python, in which one of the most popular sketches involved The Ministry of Silly

³³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfl6Lu3xQW0 “Don’t Mention the War”.

Walks, and this fact was recognised by the studio audience.³⁴

In a further scene in the same episode, whilst telling Basil about a woman he had once courted, who had accompanied him to a cricket match between Britain and India at the Oval cricket ground, Major Gowen makes the following comment:

MAJOR GOWEN: The strange thing is that throughout the morning, she kept referring to the Indians as “niggers”³⁵. No, no, no, I said. *Niggers* are the *West* Indians. *These* people are *wogs*.³⁶

Cleese and Booth’s aim through the characterisation of both Fawlty and Major Gowen mirrored that of scriptwriter Johnny Speight in *Till Death Us Do Part*; to ridicule and call into question imperialist, racist attitudes towards the “Other”. Furthermore, the matter-of-fact tone and derogatory terms used by the upper-class Major Gowen to refer to the Indian cricket team, emphasise the outdated notion of white, colonial supremacy. In fact, the character of Major Gowen may be perceived as the personification of colonialism; dated, decrepit, and declining.

John Cleese himself referred to the purpose of the comedic scenes of “The Germans”, when in June 2020 the episode was temporarily removed from the BBC-owned UKTV streaming service, as a result of its “offensive content and language”. Complaints from viewers who considered that this was a politically correct step-too-far flooded into the network, leading the BBC to reinstate the episode. John Cleese himself addressed the issue through social media when he posted the following tweet – “I would have hoped that someone at the BBC would understand that there are two ways of making fun of human behaviour. One is to attack it directly. The other is to have someone who is patently a figure of fun, speak up on behalf of that behaviour – Think of Alf Garnett...” (@JohnCleese). Despite Cleese’s comparison of Basil Fawlty or Major Gowen with Alf Garnett, we may perhaps posit that Cleese’s extreme, slapstick portrayal of mentally unstable Fawlty, allowed the audience to recognise the fictionality of the character and his ridiculous opinions more clearly, whereas the character of Alf Garnett often appeared uncomfortably realistic. We may also posit that maybe those viewers who complained when the episode was excluded from the streaming service remembered the

³⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCLp7zodUil “Ministry of Silly Walks”.

³⁵ Derogatory, racist term – totally unacceptable in contemporary society.

³⁶ As above.

scene with the German guests, which has become a comedy classic, rather than the scene which we have mentioned above which includes Major Gowen's disparaging, disrespectful remarks. Later in this work, we will further address the issue of whether political correctness and sitcom humour can ever be comfortable companions.

Despite the inclusion of sexual innuendo in sitcoms such as *Are You Being Served*, sex was not a prevalent topic in situation comedy of the era. Sitcoms such as *Terry and June* would use the bedroom as a backdrop to scenes where the protagonists would sit in bed, discussing the trivia of their lives, whilst the theme of sex – or lack of said - would surface in shows such as *Love Thy Neighbour*, as a means of contrasting the eroticism of Bill and Barbie Reynolds with the sexual indifference and apathy of Eddie and Joan Booth. In *Fawlty Towers*, Basil and Sybil's lack of mutual affection led them to occupy separate single beds, with a night table placed between them as a physical barrier, designed to discourage intimacy.

Finally, although the 70s was the decade of Women's Lib and the Equal Pay Act, despite an increase in the number and scale of female roles in sitcoms, with the possible exception of *Fawlty Towers*, female sitcom roles were still often restricted to those of indulgent but exasperated wife, or stereotypical comic secondary female personas, such as the sexually repressed spinster (Ruth Jones in *Rising Damp*) or the busty, intellectually-challenged blonde (Miss Brahms in *Are You Being Served*). As we will see in our exploration of the next decade, the 1980s would signal the commencement of an age of female power and protagonism, and this would be tentatively reflected in sitcoms of the era.

4. The Exciting Eighties and Notorious Nineties Initiate the Age of Sitcom “Girl Power”

This chapter will examine the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, in which female protagonism, rather than being viewed with suspicion by the patriarchal powers-that-be, became increasingly welcome - and more importantly successful – in both the political and cultural world.

4.1. Britain in the 1980s - The Ladies Step Forward

Britain entered the 1980s under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher – a mandate which would last for the whole decade and would afford Thatcher the accolade of the longest serving British prime minister of the 20th century. A formidable, strong-willed politician, Margaret was perhaps one of Britain’s most divisive Prime Ministers, revered and despised in equal measures by differing sectors of society. Spending more than eleven years in power, Thatcher would change the face of Britain, and was undoubtedly the initiator of the “Girl Power” which would be attributed to the Spice Girls in the following decade.

The nation which Margaret Thatcher was to preside over during the coming years, was in the midst of a severe recession at the beginning of the 1980s, and the economic cuts which Margaret’s government established, did little initially to curtail rising unemployment and growing unrest, and by January 1982 unemployment had reached three million.

In September 1980, the first pictures emerged in the press of Lady Diana Spencer, staying with the Royal Family at Balmoral Castle, in Scotland. Prince Charles - the Prince of Wales, heir to the British throne, had previously courted Diana’s sister Sarah, so they had first met when Diana was sixteen and Charles was twenty-nine. The publicity surrounding Diana’s visit to Balmoral marked the beginning of a period of seventeen years, during which Diana would marry Charles and become Her Royal Highness The Princess of Wales – the most watched and photographed woman in the world - until her untimely death in August 1997.

Following the arrest of Leroy Cooper on 11th April 1981, racial tensions which had been simmering in recent years amidst black youths’ claims of police aggression and racial harassment, culminated in riots in Brixton in South London, Toxteth in Liverpool, and Moss Side in Manchester. Conflict between the police forces and black youths would lead

to the introduction of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act of 1984, which became known as the “Stop and Search” act. This act gave police the right to stop and search any individual suspected of carrying drugs, a weapon, stolen property, or items with the intention to carry out a crime. (“Police powers to stop and search: your rights”, *Gov.UK*). Despite police affirmations to the contrary, many black youths claimed that in the case of the black community, police forces constantly abused these powers, and black youths would be stopped and searched far more frequently than their white counterparts.

On 5th June 1981 an article appeared in the “Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report” from the U.S. Center for Disease Control, describing cases of a rare lung infection found in five white, previously healthy, gay men in Los Angeles. This would constitute the first report of an illness which would spread horror, fear, ignorance, and confusion amongst not only the global gay community but the world as a whole and would be known as Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome – AIDS. The first years of the AIDS crisis were characterised by hysteria and fear, and those who were suffering from AIDS were treated as lepers and social pariahs. Rumours abounded within society regarding how the disease was contracted, and how infection could be avoided, and hard-hitting government advertisement campaigns were often not particularly helpful in dispelling the falsehoods surrounding AIDS.³⁷

The person who would contribute more than any politician or public figure to the AIDS cause would be Princess Diana, who on 9th April 1987 would open the first unit dedicated to treating AIDS patients, at London Middlesex hospital. During her visit, she not only shook hands with staff, including a nurse who was HIV-positive, but also had her photograph taken shaking hands with a patient being treated at the unit. Diana ensured that the photograph, which would become iconic, clearly showed that she was not wearing gloves, thus effectively dispelling the myth that HIV or AIDS could be transmitted through touch, and freeing sufferers from much of the stigma surrounding the disease.³⁸ Forty years after the first diagnosis of AIDS, the gay world of the 1980s and the terror which AIDS wrought amongst the gay community, would be brilliantly portrayed in the television miniseries “It’s A Sin”,³⁹ which would break several viewing records for Channel Four.

Republican prisoners at Maze prison near Belfast would begin a hunger strike in March

³⁷ www.news.sky.com/video/iconic-1980s-aids-awareness-advert-10602853 “Iconic 1980s Aids awareness advert”.

³⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=XU0SPrCTwsY “Remembering Diana: Princess mets AIDS patients”.

³⁹ www.imdb.com/video/vi3378888985?playlistId=tt9140342&ref=vp_rv_0 “It’s A Sin – 2021”.

1981 in protest at being treated as criminals rather than political prisoners. An earlier strike in late 1980 had been called off, but the Conservative government's refusal to offer concessions led to the second strike, instigated by Bobby Sands, a member of the Provisional IRA. Ten men starved themselves to death, including Sands himself, who died on 3rd October 1981 – the day on which the hunger strike ended.

On July 29th 1981 Lady Diana Spencer and Prince Charles - the Prince of Wales, were married at St. Paul's Cathedral. Diana was a mere twenty years old, whilst Charles was thirty-two. Their fairy-tale wedding, watched by millions across the world, appeared to augur a life of harmony and happiness. Their first son, Prince William Arthur Philip Louis – today Duke of Cambridge – was born on June 21st 1982 whilst their second son Henry Charles Albert David – known as Harry - today Duke of Sussex – came into the world on September 15th 1984. However, fifteen years after their marriage the couple would begin acrimonious divorce proceedings, amidst claims and counter-claims of infidelity and unreasonable behaviour.

In April 1982, Argentina invaded the British Falkland Islands. Three days later a British Task Force embarked on a journey of eight thousand miles, to free the islanders and repel the Argentinians. In her autobiography *The Downing Street Years*, Margaret Thatcher spoke of the difficult decisions, which she and her Cabinet were forced to take during this time, and asked, "... what was the alternative? That a common or garden dictator should rule over the Queen's subjects and prevail by fraud and violence? Not while I was Prime Minister" (181). Margaret's firm conviction that her Government's actions, and by definition her own, were always right, led to the Soviet Press dubbing her "The Iron Lady" – a nickname which would continue throughout her mandate and beyond – indeed a 2011 film about Margaret's life, starring Meryl Streep, would be entitled "The Iron Lady". The eventual prevailment of the British Task Force, after eleven weeks, was a bitter-sweet victory for Margaret Thatcher's government and the British people. The sovereign rights of the islanders had been upheld at a cost of more than nine hundred lives – both British and Argentinian.

Political commentators would consider that the popular momentum and patriotism generated by the Falklands conflict, were a prime contributory factor to Margaret's second election victory in June 1983, which saw the Tory government win a landslide majority of 144 seats, the largest of any political party since 1945, when Winston Churchill and his Conservative party had been defeated by Clement Attlee's Labour party.

Due to anger over proposed pit closures, on 12th March 1984 a twelve-month miners'

strike began, during which time there were violent clashes between miners and police. Miners were even violent towards their own colleagues when those that decided to return to work became targets for their striking counterparts. Some of the wives of the miners who had chosen to return to work formed the “Miners’ Wives Back to Work Campaign”, and in September 1984 these women were invited to Downing Street to meet the Prime Minister. In *The Downing Street Years*, Margaret spoke of being “moved by the courage of these women, whose families were subject to the abuse and intimidation” (364). Furthermore, she kept in touch with the members of the campaign, who acted as her ‘eyes on the ground’ and reported back to her. When the miners’ strike eventually ended on March 5th 1985, with no concessions having been made by government, Margaret continued to stay in touch with these brave women, inviting them to Downing Street on further occasions.

Terrorist activity continued throughout the 1980s. In July 1982, two bombs exploded in Hyde Park and Regent’s Park, killing members of the Household Cavalry and the Royal Green Jackets, and in December 1983 a car bomb exploded outside Harrods department store in Knightsbridge; six people were killed and dozens more injured. In *The Downing Street Years*, Thatcher alluded to the quintessentially British ‘spirit of the Blitz’ when she stated that, following the Harrods bomb, “there was an instinctive feeling – in reaction to the outrage – that everyone must go about their business normally” (397). The following Monday, Harrods opened their doors for business as usual, and Margaret’s husband – Denis Thatcher – was one of those many customers who insisted on shopping there as normal.

On 12th October 1984 the Conservative Party Conference, held at the Grand Hotel in Brighton, was also targeted by the IRA. Five people were killed and thirty injured in a devastating blast. One of those who sustained life-changing injuries was Lady Margaret Tebbit, wife of Lord Norman Tebbit, who was Thatcher’s Trade Secretary at the time of the attack. Lady Tebbit - a campaigner and nurse - was left paralysed by the bomb, and Lord Tebbit resigned from front-line politics in order to devote the rest of his life to caring for his wife. The terrorist who planted the bomb, Patrick Magee, was initially given eight life sentences for his part in the attack, but was released in 1999, under the conditions of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. In a 2014 interview Lord Tebbit declared, “... [Magee] has never repented for his sins and without repentance there can be no forgiveness ... So there is no possibility of any forgiveness there” (“Brighton Bomb: Lord Tebbit refuses to forgive IRA”, *BBC News*). Lady Tebbit died on 22nd December 2020 at the age of eighty-

six. Mrs Thatcher herself, although deeply shocked and traumatised, was unharmed in the blast. In *The Downing Street Years* Margaret explains that, on being taken to Lewes Police College for her own safety after the explosion, the only thing which she and her secretary Cynthia Crawford – known as Crawfie - could think of to do, was to kneel and pray. In the autobiographical tome, Thatcher refers to the death of Provisional IRA hunger-striker Bobby Sands, whom we have spoken of previously in this section, as marking the moment when Margaret Thatcher became the IRA's number one assassination target (Thatcher 391).

We may posit that the word which best describes the political ideology behind Margaret Thatcher's eleven year mandate is 'individualism'. Thatcherite politics believed in giving the individual the tools with which to better their lives, and policies which adhered to this ideology ranged from giving council tenants the right to buy their houses from the council at a reduced price, to privatisation of previously state-owned companies, such as British Aerospace, British Telecom, British Steel and British Airways, amongst others. Between 1986 and 1987, privatisation encouraged millions of individuals to invest small amounts of money in large corporations, following which small shareholders would eagerly scan the FTSE 100 in their evening newspapers, in order to see how their investments were faring.

The decade of the 1980s was also synonymous with greed, success, and the emergence of the 'yuppie'. 'Yuppie' was an acronym for 'young, upwardly-mobile professional', and was a term coined in the early 1980s to refer to a young professional working in a city. Both male and female yuppies wore smart suits, drank copious amounts of champagne, and carried a mobile phone, and a Filofax. The term "power dressing" for women was coined during this decade, in which women's suit jackets began to feature padded shoulders and nipped-in waists. However, whereas in the 1970s women had been keen to wear trouser suits as a sign of sexual equality, women in the 80s were sufficiently confident in their sexuality to combine the concept of female power with femininity, and would wear skirt suits rather than trouser suits. These 'yuppies' - young, confident professionals – both male and female - were the physical incarnation of Margaret Thatcher's individualist ideology and politics.

Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government was reelected for a third term in June 1989; by the time her mandate would end the following year, she would have become the longest serving Prime Minister of the last one hundred and fifty years.

In July 1989, following the resignation of Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson, in protest at the unfairness of the proposed poll tax system, which we will examine further

in section 4.3., Margaret Thatcher would appoint John Major as her Foreign Secretary, and three months later would offer him the post of Chancellor of the Exchequer. This rapid rise through the party ranks would be consolidated in 1990 when, following Margaret's resignation, Major would become Britain's seventy-second Prime Minister.

In 1989 a British scientist, Tim Berners-Lee, invented a system, which would allow the sharing of information between scientists in universities and institutes around the world. The invention was known as the World Wide Web, and would change the world forever.

The music of the era was music to dance all night and go clubbing to, and was an eclectic mix of pop, post-punk, heavy metal and rock music. Women also came to the fore musically during this decade, and although some of the biggest female names in pop of the 80s – Janet Jackson, Madonna, Whitney Houston – were American, British singers such as Sheena Easton, Kate Bush, Kim Wilde, Elkie Brooks or Bonnie Tyler all gained a reputation as iconic British performers; a reputation which has endured to this day as many of them continue to perform. In a reference to the individualism of the 80s however, these talented women were all solo performers, and the concept of sisterhood, friendship, and the all-girl band would not become prominent until the 90s.

The 1980s was a decade of contrasts; British patriotism and national unity came to the fore with events such as the Falklands War or Charles and Diana's marriage, whilst terrorist attacks continued to undermine any permanent notion of peace, unity or harmony; the careers and life styles of those young, upwardly mobile professionals, well-educated and well paid, contrasted with the grim reality of miners in fear of losing their livelihoods due to pit closures; the joyful openness and camaraderie of the gay social scene was blighted by the spectre of HIV and a possible death sentence. However, we may posit that the one constant which characterised the 80s, was that of female empowerment. Britain's first female Prime Minister, famous for her iron will and determination; a woman who would become known as "The People's Princess" and would reshape the monarchy, and continue to do so even after her death; thousands of young women who began to consider it their right to enjoy a career, rather than be restricted to a status of breeding mare and domestic servant. Despite the bra burning and placard waving which had taken place in the 1970s, it was the 1980s which really allowed women to consolidate their place in society.

We will now examine whether sitcom writers of the 80s were able to successfully and more importantly humorously, reflect this new primary female societal role or conversely, preferred to maintain the tried and tested formula of stereotypical secondary female sitcom

characters.

4.2. Television Sitcoms in the 1980s – Wartime Witticisms, Wheeler-Dealers, and Women

At the beginning of the 1980s, sitcom writers appeared to be content to rely on comedic formulas which had proved successful in previous decades. One of the most popular sitcoms of the decade of the 80s not only relied on stereotypical characterisations, but also reverted to a topic and an era, which many viewers were too young to be familiar with. *'Allo 'Allo*, first broadcast on BBC 1 in 1982, was set in a German-occupied French village during the Second World War, and the comedy storyline revolved around the antics of the German officers stationed in the village, and members of the French Resistance living in said village. The writers of *'Allo 'Allo* – Jeremy Lloyd and David Croft - were also writing *Are You Being Served*, and made use of their previous successful formula of sexual innuendo, stereotypical characterisations, and slapstick comedy in the scripts of *'Allo 'Allo*.

As with sitcoms such as *Are You Being Served* or *Dad's Army* (also co-written by David Croft), *'Allo 'Allo* featured a plethora of stereotypical characters, none of which was the star of the show. Most of the action took place in the local bistro, run by René Artois (Gorden Kaye) and his wife Edith (Carmen Silvera), or in the German military quarters, run by Colonel Kurt von Strohm (Richard Marner) and Lieutenant Hubert Gruber (Guy Siner), and under the control of Gestapo officer Herr Otto Flick (Richard Gibson). The character of René is a somewhat unlikely sex symbol, and spends his life conducting a series of affairs under his wife's nose, and providing increasingly far-fetched explanations for the compromising situations which Edith continually finds her husband involved in. In an episode entitled "The Dance of the Hitler Youth", Edith interrupts René and the waitress Yvette embracing and cries, "René! What are you doing with your arms around Yvette?" René replies, "You stupid woman! There is only one thing I could possibly be doing with my arms around Yvette. I am teaching her self-defence."⁴⁰

As with Lloyd and Croft's other sitcoms, the humour in *'Allo 'Allo* is both verbal and visual. Visual humour relies on farce and slapstick, whilst the verbal humour is found

⁴⁰www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWhXfekc1Go&list=PLrzVfut6mDggpLCiaIPjNLDTKvZmkznd0&index=6 "'Allo 'Allo Full Episodes" at 4mins 27secs.

not only in sexual innuendo, but also in the fact that the series depicts four different nationalities – French, German, English and Italian. In order to differentiate between nationalities, all actors speak in English, but with the accent of their nationality. Therefore, characters who are French, such as René, Edith or Yvette speak with a French accent, whilst German characters, such as Colonel von Strohm, Lieutenant Gruber or Herr Flick speak with a German accent. Much of the verbal humour is found in characters being unable to understand each other and having to assume a different accent to change languages. Those characters who were supposed to be English, spoke in upper-class accents, whilst the character of Officer Crabtree (Arthur Bostrom), an English spy disguised as a French policeman, would speak English incorrectly to denote his badly-spoken French. Much of Officer Crabtree’s badly-spoken “French” was written as “accidental” innuendo – such as, “I was pissing (passing) by the door, when I heard two shats (shots)”, and he would always enter the scene with the same greeting – “Good moaning (morning)!” This conglomeration of different accents and characters could make the episodes quite hard to follow unless the viewer was accustomed to the format.

Another element of *‘Allo ‘Allo* which differed from previous sitcoms written by Lloyd and Croft, was the use of seriality. Plot lines would last the whole series, so as episodes were no longer self-contained units, this also made it more difficult for viewers to dip in and out of the sitcom whenever they wished. In order to remedy this, each episode would begin with René giving an account of previous events.

Despite the innovative use of differing accents and seriality, female characterisation and stereotyping in *‘Allo ‘Allo* was depressingly familiar. René’s wife Edith embodied the perennial unattractive, nagging wife, whilst most of the members of the French Resistance were young, attractive, buxom women. Their leader was Michelle (Kirsten Cooke), whose codename was – somewhat unsurprisingly – Blue Tit. The end of the episode entitled “The Dance of the Hitler Youth” features a dance, which is somewhat reminiscent of the “Shuhplatter” dance, from Lloyd and Croft’s *Are You Being Served*, which we mentioned in 3.4., and included a link to watch the excerpt online. However, whereas the “Shuhplatter” dance was pure comic slapstick, in the case of *‘Allo ‘Allo* the “Dance of the Hitler Youth” has erotic undertones, as all the members of Hitler’s Youth movement are young girls, dressed in uniform, performing a choreographed dance which involves bending over and slapping each other’s bottoms, and ends with the girls fawning over the German officers and sitting on their laps. This characterisation of young, nubile women displaying excessive sexual attraction for portly, balding men, was not particularly helpful

during an era in which women were finally beginning to escape from social stereotyping.

Only Fools and Horses, arguably the most iconic sitcom of this whole research work, was first broadcast by the BBC in 1981. Written by John Sullivan, *Only Fools and Horses* would top a 2016 nationwide poll compiled by the Press Association, to determine the nation's favourite sitcom. Broadcast between 1981 and 1996, the show would regularly attract between eighteen and twenty million viewers; the final episode, broadcast on 29th December 1996, attracting a record-breaking twenty-four million. Regularly nominated in the category of Best Comedy at the British Academy of Film and Television Arts Awards (hereafter referred to as the BAFTAS), *Only Fools and Horses* won on three occasions – in 1986, 1989, and 1997.

Only Fools and Horses took the archetypal lovable Cockney-rogue character and made him and his family the centre of this award-winning sitcom. The comedy action revolved around Derek (Del or Del Boy) Trotter (Sir David Jason) and his younger brother Rodney (Nicholas Lyndhurst). Del and Rodney lived in a high-rise flat in Peckham with their Grandad (Lennard Pearce), and worked on the street markets of the East End. After the actor Lennard Pearce died in 1984, the character of Grandad was replaced by that of Uncle Albert (Buster Merryfield) – another elderly relative.

Del and Rodney's company was called Trotters Independent Traders – the audience being aware that the initials of their company form the word TIT – and their company vehicle was a dilapidated, bright yellow, three-wheeled van. Although always involved in shady deals, Del Boy had a heart of gold and adored his family and friends. Most scenes took place either in Del and Rodney's flat or in their local pub – The Nag's Head. Scenes in the pub featured secondary characters, who all became extremely popular during the show's run of twelve series. These included Trigger (Roger Lloyd-Pack), a gormless road sweeper with a side venture in stolen goods, Boycie (John Challis), the local car-dealer who believes that his financial prosperity is synonymous with class, and his wife Marlene (Sue Holderness), who many years previously had been Del's girlfriend, and still retains great affection for him.

Although set in Peckham, a well-known multicultural area of East London, the series did not feature an abundance of multicultural characters. However, in the characterisation of those that were included, such as the character of Denzil (Paul Barber), a long-distance Liverpudlian lorry driver, there was no reference to race or ethnicity, and the character was simply part of the cast. Furthermore, although we see an allusion to the multiculturalism of the neighbourhood in the name of the high-rise block of flats where the Trotters live –

Nelson Mandela House – this is not used as comedy material. This made a welcome change in a televisual world which in the 1970s, had based whole situation comedies around the issue of race.

As we have seen with previous popular sitcoms, catchphrases from *Only Fools and Horses* would become an integral part of the British psyche. “Rodney, you plonker!” was usually Del Boy’s exasperated reply when his brother was having difficulty understanding Del Boy’s latest hare-brained scheme for making money, although in reality Rodney was probably the more sensible of the two, rather than the most obtuse, and was actually the voice of reason. According to the online Oxford English Dictionary, the word “plonker” refers to “a foolish, inept, or contemptible person”. Although previously rarely used in everyday conversation, as the sitcom gained popularity among the viewing public, the exclamation “You plonker!” or “Don’t be a plonker all your life!” became part of everyday British language.⁴¹ Another of the popular catchphrases from the sitcom was also provided by Del Boy; always the eternal optimist, certain that their current deal would be the key to their fortune, and repeatedly assuring Rodney and Grandad that, “This time next year, we’ll be millionaires!”⁴²

John Sullivan spoke of how much of his inspiration for *Only Fools and Horses* came from real-life events. The son of an East End plumber, Sullivan would use stories told by his father in his scripts, and these would often take the form of elaborate stunts. One of the most famous of these was used for an episode which was entitled “A Touch of Glass”, in which the Trotters were hired to clean a priceless glass chandelier in a stately home. Del Boy has convinced the owner of the mansion that Trotters Independent Traders are professional chandelier cleaners, and has taken Rodney and Grandad with him as assistants. The first part of the stunt entails Del Boy telling Rodney and Grandad how they are going to proceed with the job, and reassuring the rather nervous-looking butler that they will take great care of the chandelier. Del instructs Grandad to climb up into the attic, remove the floorboards and unscrew the bolt, which is holding the chandelier in place, whilst he and Rodney will hold a large sheet under the chandelier to catch it as it falls. As Grandad finishes unscrewing the bolt and hits it with a hammer to release the chandelier, the camera pans back into a wider shot of the room below, and the audience becomes aware that there are two chandeliers in the room. Audience anticipation, referred to by

⁴¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mp-q9-AagxY “The Ultimate Plonker Compilation – Only Fools and Horses”.

⁴² www.youtube.com/watch?v=qp5hxHPITq8 “Del Boy – This Time Next Year, We’ll Be Millionaires”.

Woollacott as “the anticipation of the inevitable” (259), in which viewers can foresee a disaster of which the characters are blissfully unaware, is extremely successful in sitcoms, and this can be seen to great effect in this stunt.⁴³

In later years, John Sullivan would recount the anecdote that this episode was based on a true story his father had told him. When he had mentioned that he was going to use the story in *Only Fools and Horses*, his father had declared that it would not be good comedy material, because the real-life incident had been so traumatic. Sullivan then said that, when the episode was televised, as the credits were rolling at the end of the episode his telephone rang, and when he answered his father simply said, “OK – you were right. It *was* funny.”

As we have mentioned before, secondary characters in *Only Fools and Horses* also became extremely popular with the television audience. One of those who most won the affection of the public was Trigger; a somewhat intellectually challenged young man, whose foolish remarks provided some of the best one-liners of the series. Trigger was also the character that featured in perhaps the best-known running-gag of the sitcom. For some inexplicable reason, Trigger repeatedly referred to Rodney, both to his face and to others, by the name of “Dave”; even after being corrected, he would insist on reverting to type.⁴⁴

As we have seen with the chandelier stunt, *Only Fools and Horses* made use of both verbal and visual humour. In contrast to sitcoms such as *‘Allo ‘Allo*, the verbal humour in John Sullivan’s scripts rarely relied on sexual innuendo as a source of comic material, preferring to resort to comedy relating to the everyday life of these East End inhabitants, and in particular the failures and occasional successes of members of that close societal collective. In a similar manner to sitcoms such as *Some Mothers Do ‘Ave ‘Em*, visual comedy in *Only Fools and Horses* often took the form of elaborate stunts, such as the chandelier stunt, and denoted the climax of the visual action comedy. This may again be perceived in an episode entitled “As One Door Closes”, first broadcast in 1984 in which, in an exterior stunt, Del and Rodney are on the trail of a rare butterfly, which is worth three thousand pounds. When it appears that Rodney has caught the butterfly in his hands, audience anticipation heightens, as viewers know that every attempt to improve their financial standing always ends in abject failure for the Trotters, and gales of laughter for

⁴³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnhYzfg7ug4&list=PLWO6N6u92kHJh77L_zUg-XDkR-DUzG281&index=12 - “Best Moments – Only Fools and Horses”.

⁴⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=UVYPE7NGbnw “Trigger’s Best ‘Dave’ Moments – Only Fools and Horses”.

the viewers.⁴⁵

Although each episode formed a self-contained comic unit, John Sullivan also made use of the burgeoning penchant among writers and viewers for seriality in sitcoms, through the introduction of love interest for both Del Boy and Rodney, which allowed characters to become more rounded, and also enhanced the real affection that the British viewing public felt for them. Rodney met Cassandra (Gwyneth Strong), at evening classes and they married, and Del Boy met Raquel (Tessa Peake-Jones) through a dating agency - they also married and had a child, Damien. In a further break from sitcom tradition, neither Cassandra nor Raquel represented a female stereotype. Both were strong, independent women; Cassandra worked in a bank and Raquel was an aspiring actress, singer, and occasional stripper. After her marriage to Rodney, Cassandra continues to work and is promoted within the bank, whilst Raquel becomes a housewife and mother, although Sullivan is careful to continue affording her independence and attitude.

Despite the emphasis on inclusivity of both race and gender which is apparent throughout *Only Fools and Horses*, in recent years Sir David Jason - who played Del Boy - has commented publicly on the prominence of political correctness in today's media and admitted that some episodes of the sitcom would no longer be viable in the current societal climate. One of the episodes which he referred to features a singer with a speech impediment. As with the character of Lieutenant Finch in *The Army Game* from the 1950s, the *Only Fools and Horses* script of the episode entitled "Stage Fright", found humour in the fact that a singer whom Del Boy has signed to perform at a cabaret with Raquel, has difficulty pronouncing the letter "r".⁴⁶ In a 2012 interview with *The Sunday Telegraph*, Sir David stated, "We have to be so careful nowadays, we have lost a lot of humour because people are too frightened of getting too near touchy subjects." As we have mentioned before, the complicated combination of situation comedy humour and political correctness will be examined further later in this work.

According to Stephen Wagg, "the Trotters ... never think of being other than they are" (28), in a reference to the fact that Del and Rodney are content within their social standing. However, it may be argued that this is not necessarily so. Although not openly admitting their discontent with their social class, both Del and Rodney attempt to better themselves.

⁴⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=epBu-WmIq9Q "Three Grand Butterfly – Only Fools and Horses".

⁴⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=5g1oSN8Ldd0 "Tony Angelino's Cwying Performance with Raquel – Only Fools and Horses".

Some of these situations contribute to the comedic effect, whilst others enhance viewer affection and empathy towards the characters. Del-Boy spends much of his life attempting to present himself as suave, sophisticated and well travelled, by using phrases in French, which are completely incorrect.⁴⁷ Furthermore, on meeting Raquel for the first time, obviously embarrassed by his real occupation, he takes her for a meal at the Hilton Hotel, Park Lane which he can ill afford, and attempts to convince her that he is a millionaire Ferrari-driving businessman.

A further episode which conveys Del's desire to better himself, is "Yuppy Love", broadcast in 1989. Reflecting the social class of the "yuppies", which we have spoken about in our stroll through the historical 80s, Del attempts to present himself as a member of this societal collective. He and Trigger have dressed in suits and ties and have substituted their usual haunt of "The Nag's Head" for an up-market London wine bar. Del is flaunting his Filofax, and speaking loudly of having bought shares in "'Arrods", however his working-class accent betrays him, and he is mocked by those he is attempting to impress, until it appears that two women on the other side of the bar are showing an interest in them. The stunt which ensues from this moment, has consistently been voted as one of the most iconic in British sitcom history.⁴⁸

In contrast to Del's desire to be rich and successful, Rodney believes that success is synonymous with intelligence, and therefore decides to go to adult education evening classes, resulting in his first meeting with Cassandra. Many initial scenes between Rodney and Cassandra reflect Rodney's embarrassment at his lack of education and Cassandra's self-assurance as a member of a higher social class, although we must emphasise that she never demeans Rodney.

In our previous analysis of *Steptoe and Son*, we spoke of the manner in which the combination of comedy and serious content can form a powerful tool for the encouragement of social commentary on sensitive subjects. *Only Fools and Horses* is a prime example of this combined use of pathos and comedy. When the actor who played Grandad died in 1984, John Sullivan decided to include exterior filming of Grandad's funeral in the episode which introduced Uncle Albert as the new elderly relative. In the

⁴⁷ www.youtube.com/watch?v=g93RycMBaYM "Learning French with Monsieur Del Boy – Only Fools and Horses".

⁴⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xr034NkCwKw "Del Boy Falls Through the Bar" – Only Fools and Horses".

filming of the episode the actors' grief was real, as Lennard Pearce had only recently died, and viewers were aware of this and could perceive the tragic circumstances surrounding the episode. However, as comedy demands, the tragedy must not be drawn out for too long without a moment of comic relief. On finding what he believed to be Grandad's hat on top of the hearse, Del tenderly gives it to Rodney who throws it into the open grave on top of the coffin, following which the grave diggers begin to shovel earth onto the coffin. As everyone sombrely leaves the cemetery, the vicar is heard enquiring if anyone has seen his hat.⁴⁹

Perhaps the best example of *Only Fools and Horses* addressing sensitive subjects however, can be seen in the storyline of the episode entitled "Modern Men", in which Cassandra suffers a miscarriage. Both brothers arrive at the hospital together and a worried Rodney asks Del, "What the bloody hell am I going to say to her?" Del tells Rodney that he must be compassionate and caring, and talk about the future. As they enter Cassandra's hospital room, she tearfully tells Rodney that she is sorry that she has lost their baby. Whilst Rodney prepares to comfort her, Del Boy leaves the room in tears.

In a later episode entitled "Time On Our Hands", when it becomes obvious that Rodney is himself finding it very difficult to deal with the tragedy of Cassandra's miscarriage, Del and Rodney find themselves trapped in the lift at Nelson Mandela House. It is during this two-handed scene that Del encourages Rodney to express his own grief, in an outpouring of emotion that had viewers in tears. It is only at the end of the scene that Del sets the lift in motion again, and Rodney and the viewers realise that the lift had not broken down, but had been stopped by Del, in order to persuade his brother to open up his heart so that he may begin to heal.

In an era in which men were often still expected to control their emotions, and certainly not break down in tears, the scripting of two East End men openly discussing the raw pain which a miscarriage causes not only to the future mother but the father also, proved a turning-point in British society. It became acceptable for men to show emotion and cry in public also, and the tradition of the British "stiff upper lip" began to diminish.

It is also in this episode that Del and Rodney finally achieve their dream and become millionaires. Raquel's father recognises a pocket watch, which has been in the Trotter's garage for some time and believes it could be valuable. When the watch goes to auction at

⁴⁹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnXSiNacVZE "Grandad's Funeral – Only Fools and Horses".

Sotheby's it sells for over six million pounds.⁵⁰

The end of the final episode sees the two brothers visiting their flat in Nelson Mandela House for the last time. Despite their wonderful new lifestyle, Del Boy tearfully asks Rodney, "What am I gonna do now?" As they are leaving for the last time, the phone rings and Lenny Norris - a fellow trader - offers Del two hundred and fifty electronic carpet cleaners. Del's initial euphoria turns to dejection as Rodney tells him, "We're not in the business anymore, mate", and Del-Boy poignantly replies to Lenny that, "Trotters Independent Traders has ceased trading".

John Sullivan was also responsible for another BBC 1 sitcom success of the 1980s – *Just Good Friends* – first broadcast in 1983. This sitcom featured a small cast, and a storyline which revolved around the sentimental relationship between Vince Pinner (Paul Nicholas) and Penny Warrender (Jan Francis). Sullivan once again reverted to his own social background in the characterisation of Vince – a young, self-assured Cockney and the son of a wealthy scrap merchant. Penny belongs to a higher social class than Vince, and her parents Daphne (Silvia Kay) and Norman (John Ringham) do not approve of their beloved daughter's choice of partner. In the first episode viewers become aware of the reason behind the Warrenders' dislike for Vince, when it becomes apparent that Vince and Penny have previously been engaged to be married, and Vince has jilted Penny at the altar.

Humour was mainly verbal in *Just Good Friends*, with none of the elaborate stunts which had characterised *Only Fools and Horses*, and much of the verbal humour, particularly between Vince and Penny's mother Daphne, revolved around sarcasm-based class issues. Although in *Only Fools and Horses*, viewers had been aware of Del and Rodney's embarrassment at their lack of social standing and graces, Vince has none of these social complexes. Totally confident in every situation, he feels no need to assume a different social persona, or feel embarrassed by his lower social status, as can be seen in the following dialogue:

PENNY: So, what have you been doing today, Vince?

VINCE: Well, I've been window shopping – you know, looking for new bedding, that sort of thing.

DAPHNE (*snidely*): Pity the Army Surplus store has closed down, isn't it?

VINCE (*calmly*): Yes, I imagine you must miss it terribly, Daphne.⁵¹

⁵⁰ www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZC2LffFBw4 "Del Boy and Rodney Become Millionaires – Only Fools and Horses".

Although Penny's status as an independent career woman was appreciated by female viewers, we may posit that those same viewers found her character traits of suspicion and jealousy less humorous, and maybe somewhat sexist. Storylines often revolved around cases of mistaken identity, and Penny's presupposition that Vince was still the philandering playboy that she had known previously.⁵² This jealousy is not reciprocated by Vince however, who when Penny informs him that her past is not his concern even if she may have had affairs with "the entire Tottenham Hotspur football team", humorously replies, "That could explain their recent form." This duality of male and female personality traits showed that some aspects of female stereotyping in sitcoms were more difficult to eradicate.

The audience's enjoyment of the series revolved around the "will they, won't they?" status of Vince and Penny's relationship, together with a hint of sexual chemistry between the actors Paul Nicholas and Jan Francis. Although *Only Fools and Horses* had featured strong female characters, the stars of the show had undoubtedly been the male characters of Del Boy and Rodney. In contrast, *Just Good Friends* was the first sitcom to feature two women in primary roles within a small cast – Jan Francis as Penny and Sylvia Kay as Daphne - both female characters enjoying some of the best comedy lines of the script, a privilege which had previously been reserved mainly for male actors. In 1987, this sitcom's popularity earned it a BAFTA award for Best Comedy Programme.

If *Just Good Friends* had chartered new ground in sitcom history, our last sitcom of the 80s would consolidate absolute female success in television situation comedy. *Birds of a Feather*, created by Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran, was broadcast on BBC 1 between 1989 and 1998, before being revived on ITV in 2014. *Birds of a Feather* featured three main characters – all female. The story line revolved around the somewhat fractious relationship between Sharon Theodopolopodous (Pauline Quirke) and her sister Tracey Stubbs (Linda Robson), and their next-door neighbour Dorien Green (Lesley Joseph). The three women live in Chigwell in Essex – the county of Essex being synonymous with financial prosperity but lack of class, within the British social psyche. Sharon and Tracey's husbands are in prison for armed robbery, and Dorien is divorced. Much of the verbal

⁵¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzY74DE17As "Just Good Friends Series 1-3 Best Bits at 4mins 12secs.

⁵² www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzY74DE17As "Just Good Friends Series 1-3 Best Bits" at 4mins.

humour in *Birds of a Feather* derives from the class differences between Sharon and Tracey and their snobbish, socially-driven neighbour.

Sharon and Tracey run their own business – Pools ‘R’ Us – specialising in the installation of swimming pools. In an episode entitled “Stand By Your Man”, the two sisters have been helping one of Dorien’s friends – Beverley - with her swimming pool design, and consider that their client is rude. Dorien accuses them of insulting her “dear friend”. When Tracey retorts that if Beverley is so dear to her, why didn’t Dorien invite her to her barbecue the previous weekend, Dorien replies that the reason she didn’t invite her friend was because Sharon and Tracey were going to be at the barbecue, and “Sharon can belch for England”.

Interestingly, although the title of this sitcom – *Birds of a Feather* – is a play on words; a combination of the proverb “Birds of a feather flock together” and the slang term “bird” which refers to a woman, and in real-life the three women are extremely close friends, the concept of “sisterhood” is not central to the sitcom. The scripts feature almost exclusively verbal humour, most of which centres on unveiled insults between the three women; although they are sisters Sharon and Tracey bicker constantly, Dorien makes barbed remarks regarding Sharon’s working-class status, whilst Sharon continually casts aspersions on Dorien’s sexual integrity, usually equating her with a prostitute. We may posit that the reason for this lack of female empathy could be due to the fact that, of the twenty-seven writers who contributed to the sitcom, twenty-four of these were men and only three were women. In our section on 90s sitcoms, we will examine whether sitcoms which were written exclusively by women would portray closer relationships between members of the female sex.

In the name and characterisation of Dorien Green, we may perceive an allusion to Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorien is obsessed with looking youthful, and spends most of her alimony on cosmetic procedures. We see a reference to this in the above-mentioned episode, when Dorien enters the kitchen to confront Sharon and Tracey about their disagreement with her friend, and exclaims, “I knew it was a mistake. I knew it would end in tears”. Sharon sarcastically enquires, “Your boob job gone south for the winter?”⁵³ Dorien also has a predilection for much younger men and an active sex life, whereas Sharon and Tracey remain largely faithful to their jailbird spouses. Although the term was not widely used when *Birds of a Feather* was first broadcast, in the contemporary world

⁵³ www.dailymotion.com/video/x75bg4k “Birds of a Feather – S07E01 – Stand By Your Man” at 1min 27secs.

Dorien would be known as a “cougar” – described in the Cambridge Online Dictionary as “an older woman who has sexual relationships with younger men.” Previously to *Birds of a Feather*, the characterisation of the sitcom lothario had been exclusive to male characters, such as René Artois in *‘Allo ‘Allo*. Interestingly however, we still see inequality in the portrayal of these characters. Although René always seemed a somewhat reluctant participant in his sexual misdemeanors, in contrast Dorien’s behaviour towards her young partners is akin to that of a sexual predator. She openly tells Tracey, “Try as I might, I just can’t imagine going without sex.” Dorien is also very shallow – eventually telling Sharon, “Of course Beverley is a cow”, and admitting that she has only known Beverley for three weeks but is using her social connections in order to secure an introduction to Prince Charles – the Prince of Wales. Interestingly, this portrayal of a vain, shallow, sexually aggressive character – a first in sitcom history – was reserved for a woman. We may posit that if Dorien had been a male character, viewers of the 1980s – in particular female viewers - would have felt less comfortable with the characterisation, and the sitcom would not have achieved such popularity.

In an era when women were achieving prominence in British society, sitcoms also began to reflect this new female societal role. Although some of these, such as *‘Allo ‘Allo*, afforded primary roles to women but still maintained sexist and stereotypical characterisations, others such as *Only Fools and Horses*, *Just Good Friends* and in particular *Birds of a Feather* avoided these pitfalls, and represented a more accurate portrayal of women in the 1980s, proving that demeaning female stereotypical characters were not a prerequisite for a popular sitcom.

4.3. Britain in the 1990s – The Nation Divided, The Nation United

November 1990 would mark the end of Margaret Thatcher’s political mandate; the political decision which would provoke Thatcher’s resignation being the deeply unpopular poll tax, also known as the community charge. The initial plan was for the poll tax to replace the previous rates system, which had been based on the rental value of each home. Under the poll tax legislation, a flat rate would be paid by every adult inhabiting the property, leading to a divisive and unfair system, whereby a retired couple living in a small home and receiving a modest pension, would be paying the same amount of poll tax as a wealthy couple living in a five-bedroomed detached house.

Although the original plan had been that the poll tax would curb Labour-run councils’

overspending, the only people that poll tax really affected were those staunch Tories who had consistently voted for Margaret and her government over the previous ten years. This universally hated tax led to riots and civil disobedience, and a rebellion amongst Margaret's own MPs. Following his resignation in 1989, Margaret's ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer Nigel Lawson, had described the poll tax as "completely unworkable and politically catastrophic" ("Poll tax: Earlier launch in Wales was considered", *BBC News*).

Realising that her mandate was under threat, Margaret turned to her newly appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer John Major, to help her find a solution. However, the practical difficulties proved insurmountable, and in November 1990, one of the poll tax's most outspoken critics - Michael Heseltine, Margaret's Secretary of State for the Environment - triggered a leadership contest, achieving one hundred and fifty-two Parliamentary Party votes, to Margaret's two hundred and four in the first ballot. This meant however, that Margaret had not achieved sufficient votes to prevent a second ballot. On 22nd November 1990, Thatcher reluctantly resigned, in order that her party could choose a more popular candidate than herself in the contest with Heseltine. The candidate proposed by Margaret was John Major, who won the ballot against Heseltine, and on 27th November became the new leader of the Conservative Party and by definition, Prime Minister. In *The Downing Street Years*, Margaret's description of her last morning in Downing Street strikes a personal note, in which the reader perceives the fickleness of politics, when Margaret describes her shock on attempting to enter her study on her last day in office to ensure she had left nothing behind, to find that she "could not get in because the key had already been taken off ...[her] key-ring" (861). On 9th March 1992, John Major's Tory Party would win the election with a majority of twenty-one seats.

In August 1990, an international incident took place which would have far-reaching political and humanitarian consequences. On 2nd August, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein ordered the invasion of Kuwait. Following his refusal to withdraw, on 17th January 1991, US-led forces, backed by a United Nations mandate, launched 'Operation Desert Storm' to liberate Kuwait. On 27th February, President George Bush (Senior) announced that their aim had been achieved. Saddam Hussein remained in power in Iraq however, and his Sunni-dominated regime continued to rule the country with a rod of iron, brutally stamping out rebellion attempts by other ethnic groups, such as the majority Shiite population or the Kurds. In April 1991, the United Nations approved the installation of a safe haven in northern Iraq to protect the Kurds, and Iraq was ordered to desist from any military activity in this area ("Iraq profile – timeline", *BBC News*). That same month, Iraq was subjected to

a UN-led weapons inspection programme, based on the belief that Saddam Hussein's regime possessed weapons of mass destruction. In August 1992, southern Iraq also became a no-fly zone for Iraqi military aircraft ("Iraq profile – timeline", *BBC News*).

A biography about Princess Diana, entitled *Diana: Her True Story*, written by Andrew Morton, was published in June 1992. The book contained intimate details of Charles and Diana's calamitous marriage; Diana's loneliness and struggles with bulimia and self-harming, and Charles' ongoing affair with Mrs Camilla Parker-Bowles, a relationship which had begun when they were both single, and had been resumed around 1986, whilst both were married to their respective partners. Although at the time Diana denied any involvement in Morton's book, in 2017 Morton admitted that the biography had been a transcription of Diana's own words, which had been secretly biked through London to Morton whilst he was compiling the book, by Dr James Colthurst, a close friend of Diana's ("How I got the tapes that made history", *Mail Online*).

In August 1992, a newspaper revealed details of an intimate telephone conversation between Diana and a man named James Gilbey, and three months later a recording of a private conversation between Charles and Camilla also became public. On December 9th 1992, John Major announced in the House of Commons that Charles and Diana would separate, but would not divorce, and that Diana would still become Queen in the event that Charles should ascend to the throne ("Princess Diana and Prince Charles: A Complete Timeline of Their Relationship", *Biography*).

Two years after their separation, in a televised interview given to Jonathan Dimbleby, Prince Charles admitted adultery, although insisting that this began after his marriage had broken down. The following year, in a similarly explosive interview with journalist Martin Bashir, Princess Diana also admitted to adultery, and in a reference to Charles' relationship with Camilla Parker-Bowles, stated, "There were three of us in this marriage, so it was a bit crowded" (Princess of Wales, Diana).⁵⁴ Following both the Prince and the Princess's televised admittances of infidelity and subsequent months of negotiations, dubbed by the Press as "The War of the Waleses", on July 15th 1996 their Royal Highnesses filed for divorce, and their "fairy-tale" marriage was dissolved six weeks later.

Twenty-four years later, in November 2020, questions would be asked regarding Martin Bashir's journalistic integrity regarding this "scoop" interview. Diana's brother Earl Spencer would publicly accuse Bashir of providing Diana with false bank statements, as

⁵⁴ www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/politics97/diana/panorama.html "The Panorama Interview".

“proof” that two of Diana’s senior household members were being paid by the security services to provide information on her. Furthermore, Earl Spencer would also allege that Bashir produced fake documents making false and defamatory claims about senior Royals⁵⁵ (Princess Diana interview: BBC vows to ‘get to truth’ about Panorama interview, *BBC News*). The BBC has appointed a retired Supreme Court judge – Lord Dyson, to lead an independent inquiry into the matter, although Martin Bashir, himself now head of the BBC’s Religious Affairs department, is apparently unable to assist, as he is recovering from heart surgery and has also contracted Covid. There have been increasing calls for a public inquiry, amidst fears of a cover-up by the BBC.

Following a slump in the UK’s financial market, on September 16th 1992, known as Black Wednesday, the collapse of the pound sterling forced Britain to withdraw from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM). Although at the time seen as a humiliating episode for Britain, withdrawal from the ERM was a major factor behind Britain not joining the Euro Single Currency in 2002, a fact which would make Britain’s eventual exit from the European Union slightly less problematic.

On 22nd April 1993, black teenager Stephen Lawrence was stabbed to death at a bus stop in Eltham in South London. The following day police received information giving the names of four white suspects. However, despite the information received, the subsequent institutionally flawed police investigation into Stephen’s death, would lead to a public inquiry in 1999 – the Macpherson Report – which ran to three hundred and eighty nine pages and when published, would accuse the Metropolitan Police of ‘institutional racism’ and make seventy recommendations for improving police attitudes to racism.⁵⁶ In 2012, thanks to scientific advancements in DNA testing, and the tenacity and eloquence of Stephen’s parents, Neville and Doreen Lawrence, who were determined to bring their son’s murderers to justice, two of the original suspects – Gary Dobson and Stephen Norris - were found guilty of Stephen’s murder, and were jailed for fifteen and fourteen years respectively. Doreen Lawrence was awarded an OBE (Order of the British Empire) in 2003, and in 2013 was invited to become a Life Peer in the House of Lords, where she continues to speak out against racism. The case of Stephen Lawrence remains the most high-profile murder case involving a black victim in British judicial history. In 2018, then

⁵⁵ www.bbc.com/news/uk-54991018 “Princess Diana interview: BBC vows to ‘get to truth’ about Panorama interview.

⁵⁶ www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/277111/4262.pdf “Full transcript of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry” – report by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny.

Prime Minister Teresa May announced that 22nd April – the date of Stephen’s death – would henceforth be known as “Stephen Lawrence Day”.

The Sunday Trading Act was passed by Parliament in July 1994, allowing shops in England and Wales to open on the sabbath. Previously to this, under the Shops Act of 1950, with a small number of exceptions, Sunday trading had been illegal (“1994: Sunday trading legalised”, *BBC Home*). This legalisation of Sunday trading would result in a further drop in church attendance, which had been gradually declining since the beginning of the 20th century; results of a study conducted by Peter Brierley and published in his 1998 book *The Tide Is Running Out*, confirmed that only 7.5% of the adult population attended church during the decade of the 90s.

On 12th March 1994, the first women priests were ordained into the Church of England. This was a controversial move, rejected by many traditionalists, some of who joined the Catholic Church in protest. As we will see in our section on 1990s sitcoms, this move towards ecclesiastical equality would be reflected in a particularly popular sitcom of the 90s – *The Vicar of Dibley*.

The Channel Tunnel opened on 6th May 1994 – linking London and Paris by rail. Costing twice the original estimate and a year behind schedule, it is the longest undersea tunnel in the world, measuring fifty kilometres, thirty-nine of which are buried under the Channel.⁵⁷

Following eighteen years of Conservative governments, on 1st May 1997 the Labour Party once more entered government under the leadership of Tony Blair. Blair was seen as the modernising face of traditional Labour – in fact, the party became known as New Labour. In a nod to Harold Macmillan’s Conservative Party 1959 election campaign slogan, “You’ve Never Had It So Good”, Blair’s campaign slogan was, “Things Can Only Get Better”, and the song with the same title by D Ream was played at Labour’s election campaign meetings.⁵⁸ Young, dynamic, and married with three young children, Blair and his wife Cherie were welcomed by a British electorate who afforded him a landslide majority, Labour’s first since 1966. Cherie was a brilliant barrister and interestingly, was the daughter of Anthony Booth, who had played Alf Garnett’s socialist son-in-law and nemesis in *Till Death Us Do Part* back in the 1960s.

On 1st July 1997, Britain handed the former British Dependent Territory of Hong Kong back to China, after more than one hundred and fifty years of British rule. Under the ‘One

⁵⁷ www.youtube.com/watch?v=O62QFQE9z5I “Duerr’s Proud Moment: Channel Tunnel”.

⁵⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dl-ai9HuR60 “D Ream – Things Can Only Get Better”.

Country, Two Systems' policy, Hong Kong was to keep its own currency, legal system, customs, and immigration laws for a minimum of fifty years. However, in 2019, China's plans to allow extradition of Hong Kong residents to mainland China, would lead to anti-government protests which continued for a least a year, and are still not fully resolved at the time of writing this research paper.

In the same way that all Americans remember where they were and what they were doing when President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was assassinated, all Britains remember where they were and what they were doing when, on the morning of 31st August 1997, it was announced that Diana, Princess of Wales had been killed in a car crash in Paris. Diana had spent the month of August in the company of playboy Dodi Fayed, son of the owner of Harrods, Mohamed Al Fayed, amidst rumours that this was becoming a serious relationship. On 30th August, they returned from a holiday on Dodi's yacht in the Mediterranean and checked in to the Ritz Hotel in Paris. Shortly before midnight, Diana and Dodi left the Ritz and, hotly pursued by photographers and press on motorbikes, were driven by Henri Paul, deputy head of security at the Ritz, to an apartment off the Champs Elysées. At approximately half past midnight on the morning of the 31st August, the car in which they were travelling crashed at high speed in a road tunnel at Pont de l'Alma. Dodi Fayed and the driver Henri Paul were killed instantly, whilst Diana was seriously injured, as was Trevor Rees-Jones, Diana's bodyguard. Despite the best attempts of surgeons at Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital, Diana was pronounced dead at four o'clock in the morning. Rees-Jones was the only occupant of the car to survive, although with life-changing injuries.

Diana's death provoked an unprecedented outpouring of grief throughout Britain and resulted in outspoken criticism of the Royal Family, who initially remained at Balmoral Castle in Scotland, with the intention of protecting Princes William and Harry from the media circus surrounding their mother's demise. Eventually, on returning to London, Queen Elizabeth II agreed to a live television broadcast addressing the nation and paying tribute to Diana.⁵⁹ Diana was afforded a state funeral which was held at Westminster Abbey on 6th September 1997, and was televised to a worldwide audience of an estimated 2.5 billion people ("Some 2.5 billion TV viewers watch Princess Diana's funeral", *History*).

Ostensibly designed to bring an end to The Troubles in Northern Ireland, The Good

⁵⁹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_-tlBn8Vis "Queen Elizabeth II Addresses Princess Diana's Death – Being The Queen" at 1min 46secs

Friday Agreement between nationalists and unionists was signed on 10th April 1998. The agreement included plans for a devolved government, early release of terrorist prisoners, and the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. The Northern Ireland Assembly met for the first time on 1st July of the same year, establishing a number of political institutions aimed at improving Anglo-Irish relationships. In 2010, the Hillsborough Agreement was signed, allowing devolution of policing and judicial powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly, and in 2014 British and Irish governments signed the Stormont House Agreement, aimed at reconciliation and economic renewal. The Stormont House agreement also paved the way for the development of an institutional framework for dealing with past troubles and conflicts. However, dissident republican groups rejected this political process and attempts at progress and continued to carry out terrorist attacks. By 2017, an agreed framework for dealing with the past had still not been consolidated, and the power-sharing Executive collapsed. It was not until 11th January 2020, under the New Decade, New Approach agreement, that power-sharing was restored, with all five main political parties in Northern Ireland participating (“The Good Friday Agreement and today”, *Northern Ireland Department of Foreign Affairs*).

On 1st January 1999, the Euro was launched for the first time, although during the first three years of its existence it was only used for accounting and electronic purposes. Physical currency – banknotes and coins – would come into use from 1st January 2002, however as we have mentioned previously, Britain’s unease about a European single currency, combined with the collapse of the pound sterling following ‘Black Wednesday’ of September 16th 1992, led to the decision not to join the single currency.

Devolution continued throughout the 1990s; following a Welsh referendum held in May 1997, and the passing of the Government of Wales Act by the UK Parliament in 1998, the first elections for the Welsh Assembly were held on 6th May 1999. A Scottish referendum was also held in September 1979, followed by the Scotland Act, passed by the UK Parliament in 1979, and on 1st July 1999 Queen Elizabeth II formally opened the Scottish Parliament.

Musically, the 1990s was the era of the boy and girl bands – British boy bands such as Take That, or Irish songsters Westlife and Boyzone, filled stadiums with their anthems, ballads, and choreography, whilst girl bands such as Atomic Kitten, All Saints, or the global phenomenon that was the Spice Girls, sang of love, friendship, and sisterhood, and inspired a whole generation of teenagers, assuring them that “Girl Power” made anything possible. All Saints would eventually split in 2001, and following Geri Halliwell’s

departure from the group in 1998, the Spice Girls would also break up in 2000, reforming in 2012 to perform for the London Olympics, and once again in 2019 for a reunion tour; this last tour without the presence of “Posh Spice” – Victoria Beckham, née Adams. Between them, the Spice Girls and All Saints claim the record of the three highest selling LPs by a girl group in UK chart history (“Re-View: British Girl Groups of the 1990s”, *Chartshaker*).

The successful path of the boy bands was also fraught with setbacks and splits. Robbie Williams left Take That in 1995, and the rest of the group split in 1996, reforming again in 2006 with a comeback album – “Beautiful World” - which would enter the UK Album Charts at number one. As we will see in 5.3., Gary Barlow from Take That would become a social media hero – performing with famous guests and raising spirits throughout the very difficult period of 2020-21, with his online “Crooner Sessions”.

The 1990s was also the decade of the “supermodel”. As we have seen in the 1960s, popular models were already heavily involved in promotion of fashion brands, makeup, and hairstyles. In the 1990s however, the “supermodels” took on cult status, and although they were merely continuing the work which 60s models had begun, they were now paid extortionate sums of money for their services. British supermodels included Naomi Campbell and Kate Moss, both of whom are still modelling today. In the 1990s, Naomi Campbell famously said that she and her fellow supermodels did not get out of bed for less than £10,000 a day. Perhaps this was not a particularly sensitive remark to make, bearing in mind that an average UK yearly London wage in 1990 was just over £17,000.⁶⁰ Reports of inflated wages for models, together with media coverage of anti-social behaviour, combined to provide the public with the perception of the world of fashion, modelling and advertising, and those involved in said enterprises, as being superficial and shallow. In our section on 1990s sitcoms, we will examine the manner in which this superficiality and shallowness would be used as a source of comedy material, in a sitcom which would achieve cult status during the decade – *Absolutely Fabulous* – also known as *Ab Fab*.

If the 80s had been the era of individualism, the 90s was the decade of perceived unity. The British public were united in their condemnation of the Stephen Lawrence murder, and in their grief at the death of Diana, Princess of Wales – referred to by Tony Blair as ‘the people’s princess’; two nations were united through the construction of the Channel Tunnel; the Good Friday Agreement attempted to finally end centuries of Anglo-Irish

⁶⁰ www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/593477.stm “Housing: a bust to come?”

conflict and antagonism, whilst further devolution of powers in Wales and Scotland, augured continued stability for the union of the United Kingdom, albeit through allowing other nations of the Union the freedom to determine their future. We will now examine the extent to which sitcoms of the decade reflected the concepts of unity, friendship, compromise, and sisterhood which we have spoken about in this journey through the 1990s.

4.4. Television Sitcoms in the 1990s – Ridicule, Religion and Realism

Although later in this section we will be examining groundbreaking sitcoms of the 1990s which would introduce fresh, new formats, we will begin with one of the most popular sitcoms of the decade, which reverted to the ever-popular topic of class, and the humour which can be found in the desire of a particular character to present themselves as belonging to a higher social class, despite the fact that family members are always on hand to shatter the image.

Keeping Up Appearances, written by Roy Clarke, was first broadcast in 1990 on BBC 1 and ran for five series. The main character was Hyacinth Bucket (Patricia Routledge), who insisted on pronouncing her surname as “Bouquet”, and would always answer the phone with the phrase, “The Bouquet residence. The lady of the house speaking”.⁶¹ Hyacinth is married to Richard (Clive Swift), an affable, long-suffering man who works as a civil servant, and acquiesces to all Hyacinth’s wishes, albeit often protesting mildly. Hyacinth insists that Richard carries a briefcase with him to work, in order to display his elevated professional status. Richard often purposely “forgets” his briefcase, and Hyacinth always runs out of the house after him, ensuring that the neighbours hear her telling him that he has forgotten his briefcase. However, as Richard repeatedly tells her, the only item he carries in said briefcase are his sandwiches for lunch.

Hyacinth’s next-door neighbours are Elizabeth and her divorced brother Emmet. Elizabeth is a tolerant, somewhat shy lady, who dreads being asked into Hyacinth’s house for coffee, because Hyacinth’s house-proud attitude, constantly cleaning and polishing, makes Elizabeth nervous, and she invariably ends up dropping her coffee and biscuits. Emmet is a pianist and producer and director of the local amateur operatic society, and therefore is constantly on Hyacinth’s social radar, because Hyacinth mistakenly believes

⁶¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=4T0eXFpCx9c “Keeping Up Appearances – Hyacinth gets a phone call from Violet” at 0mins 28secs.

that she has a talent for singing opera. For this reason, Emmet spends his life attempting to avoid Hyacinth, and never succeeding – this is a recurrent running-gag in every episode.⁶² Apart from singing at Emmet at every opportunity, Hyacinth also repeatedly invites her neighbours to her “candlelight suppers”, where she insists on “entertaining” her guests, encouraging Emmet to play the piano whilst she sings for them.

We have previously mentioned Hyacinth’s greeting on answering the telephone, and the telephone is the most important prop in the scenes which take place within Hyacinth’s home. Apparently, Hyacinth’s telephone number is very similar to that of the local Chinese take-away, as many of the calls she receives are meant for the restaurant. Another frequent caller is Hyacinth and Richard’s son Sheridan, who is never seen throughout the series. Although Hyacinth proudly tells anyone who will listen how “sensitive” Sheridan is and how much he adores his mother, Sheridan’s telephone calls always include a request for money, and are never simply to ask after his parent’s well-being. From this use of the telephone prop, the viewer becomes aware that, despite her assertions to the contrary, Hyacinth does not in fact have any friends, and also suffers from loneliness and social isolation. Even when she attends charity functions, she is the volunteer that everyone tries to avoid.

The characters which remind Hyacinth of her working-class background are her family. Her sisters Daisy (Judy Cornwell) and Rose (Mary Millar), live with Daisy’s husband Onslow (Geoffrey Hughes). Onslow is slovenly and work-shy although Daisy adores him, and Rose has a succession of elderly boyfriends and, although not young herself, dresses as if she were a lady of the night. The sisters’ father – Daddy – lives with them and is often the cause of chaotic scenes. Although to those Hyacinth tries to impress, “Daddy” is a war-hero, he in fact has dementia, and will often, to everyone’s consternation, disappear for a few hours, or arrive home in the company of totally unsuitable women whom he declares he is going to marry.

Comedy action which revolves around Hyacinth’s working-class family usually begins with a telephone call, in which Daisy requests Hyacinth’s aid with some familial disaster, usually involving “Daddy”. Interestingly, despite her desire to distance herself from her working-class roots, Hyacinth never refuses to help her family, although she will go to extreme lengths to avoid others seeing where they live and realising that they are her blood

⁶² www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4-Hzw-MIs0 “Emmett’s Hilarious Attempts at Avoiding Hyacinth – Keeping Up Appearances”.

relatives. In an episode entitled, “The Charity Shop”, on asking Elizabeth to give her a lift to Daisy’s house, Hyacinth instructs Elizabeth to park outside a large, detached house, and after telling her to wait in the car, then makes a de-tour on foot to arrive at her sisters’ home. The humour of these scenes can be found in the spectacle of the impeccably dressed Hyacinth, climbing over walls and knocking into people, before finally arriving at her sisters’ dilapidated abode, somewhat dishevelled and flustered. On arrival at Daisy and Onslow’s house, another running-gag of the series features, in which their dog, which is always in the car in the drive, barks at Hyacinth as she walks up the garden path, making her jump and fall backwards into the hedge.⁶³ Interestingly, the dog only barks at Hyacinth and nobody else.

Although Hyacinth appears to be ashamed of her family, when other characters such as Richard or Elizabeth are in their company, they get along famously with them, and do not even seem to notice the lack of social graces which Hyacinth is so aware of, so we may perceive that the only person who is uncomfortable with her family roots is Hyacinth herself. However, despite the embarrassment they cause her, and the manner in which they interfere in her desire to distance herself from them, she will never desert them when they are in need. This facet of Hyacinth’s character served to reaffirm a subliminal message of family loyalty.

Patricia Routledge – a consummate professional and brilliant comedian – often performed her own stunts, which as we have seen in previous sitcoms such as *Dad’s Army* or *Some Mothers Do ‘Ave ‘Em*, would often mark the comedic climax of the episode. We can see an example of this in an episode entitled, “What to Wear When Yachting”, when Hyacinth plans to invite Elizabeth and Emmet for supper on a yacht, which one of Sheridan’s friends has lent them for the weekend. However, on arrival at the mooring, Hyacinth and Richard realise the “yacht” is not as upmarket as Hyacinth had hoped. Despite this, while waiting for Elizabeth and Emmet, they attempt to board the boat with hilarious consequences.⁶⁴ As we can see in this excerpt, the social commentary of these class-based sitcoms can be found in the fact that the character’s attempts at presenting themselves as successful and upper-class always end in abject failure, thus emphasising the futility of trying to be anything other than oneself, and simultaneously reassuring

⁶³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVnpgdTZR7U “Hyacinth Takes a Detour – Keeping Up Appearances”.

⁶⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQOwakB7Z0&t=37s “Richard and Hyacinth’s Nautical Buffet Suffers a Setback – Keeping up Appearances”.

audiences that social authenticity is the best policy.

The second sitcom which we will examine of this decade has previously been mentioned in our historical section on the 1990s, and was a comedic spoof, ridiculing the “luvvie” world of the minor celebrity, and inspired by public interest in the status and lifestyles of said celebrities and models, and those who managed them. *Absolutely Fabulous* or *Ab Fab*, written by Jennifer Saunders and Dawn French, was first broadcast in 1992 on BBC 2, before switching to the more mainstream BBC 1 from the second series onwards, as the sitcom gained popularity. *Ab Fab* followed the adventures of Edina “Eddy” Monsoon (Jennifer Saunders), the owner of a mildly successful PR company. She is shallow and self-absorbed, and her life revolves around being seen with and around the “right people”. She is also a fashion victim, obsessed with wearing the latest trends, regardless of whether they suit her body shape or her age. Edina lives with her sensible daughter Saffron – Saffy – (Julia Sawalha), who despairs of her mother’s wild antics and refusal to act her age. Neither mother nor daughter understand each other or make any attempt to engage in one another’s lives. Edina’s mother – whose first name is never mentioned in the series – was played by veteran actress June Whitfield, who had played June in *Terry and June*. Most of “Mother’s” contributions to the script were brilliantly sarcastic one-liners.⁶⁵ Eddy also employs a totally incompetent PA – Bubble (Jane Horrocks), whose foolish remarks make her the female equivalent of Del Boy’s gormless friend Trigger in *Only Fools and Horses*. However, perhaps the most iconic character of the sitcom is Eddy’s hard-drinking, chain-smoking, drug addict, model friend Patsy (Joanna Lumley). Edina and Patsy spend their lives reminiscing about the fun they have experienced in the past, and attempting to convince themselves that age is not creeping up on them. Saffy considers that Patsy has an extremely bad influence on her mother, and Patsy despises Saffy for her perceived dullness, and overt criticism of Eddy and Patsy’s superficial lifestyle.

Saunders and Lumley’s portrayals of Edina and Patsy provided a perfect parody of the superficiality of the PR aspect of the world of advertising, entertainment, and modelling, and the ego massaging of clients which this entails. Audiences loved the exaggerated, quasi-slapstick comedy, with storylines revolving around the consumption of alcohol and cigarettes, Eddy’s obsession with being thin, and Patsy’s obsession with sex.⁶⁶ Although she has never confirmed this to be the case, the fact that Joanna Lumley’s career began in

⁶⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=30cG5xP5mzU “Just The One Dear”.

⁶⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jar7Pk0OCR4 “Absolutely Fabulous – Best of Series 1”.

modelling back in the 1960s, suggests that her portrayal of Patsy, although farcically hyperbolic, could have been based on real characters she had encountered during that time.

The fact that the type of world which Saunders and French portrayed in *Ab Fab* was so far removed for the lives of most of the general public, meant that scripts which included the quaffing of copious amounts of “Bolly” (Bollinger champagne), outrageous flirting and general bitching, although obviously parodical, were greatly enjoyed by viewers, who could self-satisfyingly reflect on the fact that their own lives, although homely and boring, were perhaps rather less demanding than the chaotic existence of Edina and Patsy.

It must also be pointed out that despite the fact that all the main characters and the writers were female, we still see no evidence of the concept of sisterhood, family unity, or kindness in the sitcom. Indeed, some of the insults bandied around between mother and daughter could be interpreted as particularly hurtful, and may be considered by some viewers as an acquired comedic taste. In one episode, Eddy complains about her daughter’s taste in clothes and asks Saffy, “Why does everything you wear look like it’s bearing a grudge? You’ve got a wardrobe full of little murderers.” In a further episode, in an attempt to engage with Saffy, Eddy asks her daughter, “Saffy, look at Mummy, look at me. Do I need surgery?” Saffy replies, “Yes, have your mouth sewn up”. In contrast to sitcoms such as *Only Fools and Horses* in which, despite comic insults between characters, the public could perceive a theme of underlying affection, the characters in *Ab Fab* displayed no such saving graces, and any affection portrayed was false and superficial. However, viewers loved the extravagance and eccentricity of the characters, and the sitcom acquired cult status amongst the television public and won Best Comedy Entertainment Programme at the BAFTAs in 1993.

Despite our argument regarding the acerbic humour of this sitcom, Saunders’ remorseless mockery of the world of public relations, reality stars, famous and not-so-famous models, did not only appeal to a majority of television viewers, but also to those she ridiculed in her scripts. The cult status which *Ab Fab* achieved in the world of television, meant that when an *Absolutely Fabulous* movie was planned for 2016, a total of sixty A-list celebrities were overjoyed to make cameo appearances in the movie. These included models Kate Moss, Lara Stone and Jerry Hall, singers Spice Girl Emma Bunton and Lulu, actor Rebel Wilson, and world-class designers Jean Paul Gaultier and Stella McCartney.

The next sitcom which we will include in the decade of the 1990s, was set in a very different sitcom “world” to *Absolutely Fabulous* and has also been referred to in the

historical section of this chapter. As we have mentioned previously in this work, although sitcoms set in the ecclesiastical world – such as *Oh Brother!* or *All Gas and Gaiters* - were popular in the 1960s, these were set within the Catholic church rather than the Church of England. However, the general decline in church attendance which we have spoken of, together with the Sunday Trading Act allowing shops to open on the Sabbath, and the decision to ordain women priests into the Church of England, all contributed to a general lessening of ecclesiastical influence within society, and in 1994 the first sitcom to feature a primary character of not only a Church of England vicar, but a female one, was broadcast on BBC 1. *The Vicar of Dibley* took all the concepts which we have mentioned that characterised the 1990s – friendship, unity, compromise, and sisterhood, and served them up to the public in a sitcom which would become a comforting reminder that bucolic, slow-paced corners of Britain still remained, where people held each other in genuine affection. Even the opening credits of the show, which featured a rendition of Psalm 23 - “The Lord Is My Shepherd” – and showed footage of pastoral country landscapes and rolling fields, transmitted a sense of peace and well-being.⁶⁷

The Vicar of Dibley, was written by Richard Curtis and Paul Mayhew-Archer, and the first episode introduced the new Vicar of Dibley – Geraldine Grainger (Dawn French) and showed the comic reactions of David Horton (Gary Waldhorn), the well-connected Head of Dibley Parish Council, his well-meaning, bumbling son Hugo (James Fleet), and other members of the Council.⁶⁸ This first scene introduces most of the main members of the cast; Frank Pickle (John Bluthal), who takes the minutes at Parish Council meetings, and is somewhat predictable and boring; Leticia Cropley (Liz Smith), who arranges the flowers for the church and plays the organ during services; Jim Trott (Trevor Peacock), who suffers from a nervous stammer which results in him beginning every sentence with the words, “No..no..no..no..no; and Alice Tinker the vergier (Emma Chambers), whose ability to misunderstand the simplest of concepts, led to some of the most humorous scenes of the sitcom. The last member of the Parish Council was Owen Newitt (Roger Lloyd-Pack); a local farmer with few social skills, who harbours a non-reciprocated sexual desire for Geraldine, and possesses an innate ability for making totally inappropriate remarks.⁶⁹ Roger Lloyd-Pack’s consummate acting talents led him to create two iconic secondary

⁶⁷ www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAZN1oVir5A “The Vicar of Dibley Theme (Original)”.

⁶⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=zrUal4mUmAk “The Vicar’s First Ever Scene – The Vicar of Dibley”.

⁶⁹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDNO4VvkmII “Owen Newitt’s (Roger-Lloyd-Pack) Funniest Moments – The Vicar of Dibley”.

sitcom characters over two decades – Trigger from *Only Fools and Horses* in the 80s, and Owen Newitt in *The Vicar of Dibley* in the 90s.

Geraldine Grainger is bubbly and modern, with a wicked sense of humour, and despite the initial reticence of the Parish Council, eventually manages to charm them all to the extent that, in the 1996 Christmas episode entitled “The Christmas Lunch Incident”, she is invited to three different houses for Christmas dinner, and attends them all so as not to hurt her parishioners’ feelings.

The Vicar of Dibley followed the pattern of self-contained comic unit, with a thread of seriality running throughout the sitcom, and a combination of visual and verbal humour. However, Dawn French’s characterisation of Geraldine Grainger also made use of non-verbal humour, in which her facial expressions spoke volumes, and became an important comedic feature. We can see an example of this combination of visual, verbal, and non-verbal humour, in an episode entitled “Winter”, in which Owen and Frank audition for the church nativity play, which Geraldine is producing.⁷⁰

In a further episode entitled “Dibley Live”, we see a perfect example of the combination of humour and pathos in sitcoms. To celebrate the anniversary of the church, the villagers have organised a radio station to be broadcast for a week, from the vicarage. When it is Frank’s turn to broadcast, Geraldine carries out a sound check with him, and then settles down on the sofa behind him to listen, yawning prematurely and twiddling her hair, as she believes that Frank’s contribution to the radio will be less than scintillating. Frank’s radio broadcast becomes the means through which he will announce to the whole village that he is gay. His initial confession, coupled with Geraldine’s surprised reaction, leads to a heightened moment of audience laughter. However, as Frank continues by saying, “I’ve been trying to tell you, dear friends, for twenty years, but it’s tricky”, the studio audience laughter begins to die out, and is replaced by empathetic noises, and as Frank finishes by saying, “That’s the lovely thing about radio. Speaking into this microphone here alone tonight, I can say things to you that I could never say face to face”, the interior shot of Frank and Geraldine is replaced by an exterior, nighttime shot of the vicarage, in darkness except for the light shining from two windows, by which time the audience is so moved that they are completely silent.

As befits the non-celibacy of Church of England vicars, Geraldine shows a healthy interest in sex and attractive men, and enjoys romances with David Horton, and his brother

⁷⁰ www.youtube.com/watch?v=URqPQ0aMW4A “Owen and Frank Audition for the Nativity – The Vicar of Dibley”.

Simon, before eventually marrying accountant Harry Kennedy (Richard Armitage) in 2006. However, as is the norm in comedy sitcoms, Geraldine's path to romance never runs smoothly, as can be seen in an episode entitled "Autumn", in which she enjoys a "romantic" date in the countryside with Simon Horton, David's brother.⁷¹

Although humour can be found in Geraldine's interactions with all members of her Parish Council, the most iconic scenes of the sitcom are those which take place between Geraldine and Alice Tinker, the verger. Despite the foolishness of most of Alice's remarks, Geraldine responds with infinite patience and above all humour, and the scenes between the two actors are the perfect example of the concept of sisterhood and friendship.⁷² The end of each episode would feature a scene between Geraldine and Alice, in which Geraldine would tell a joke, usually religiously themed and irreverent, the punchline of which Alice would always fail to understand.⁷³

Sadly, five of the main actors from *The Vicar of Dibley*, including Emma Chambers who played Alice Tinker, have died in recent years, and being that viewers considered that the characters they played were irreplaceable, it was decided that it would not be possible to continue with the series.

We have previously spoken of how audiences of the 1960s ecclesiastical sitcoms *Oh Brother!* and *All Gas and Gaiters* experienced a blurring of reality between the actor Derek Nimmo and the religious characters he played. Interestingly, the same phenomenon has taken place with actor Dawn French and her alter-ego Geraldine Grainger, but this did not occur when the sitcom was first broadcast, but when Dawn French reappeared as Geraldine on television screens during the global pandemic of 2020-21. We will examine this further in 5.4., which will deal with how sitcom programmers and scriptwriters have been forced to innovate during this difficult ongoing situation.

Our last sitcom of the 1990s introduced a totally new concept to the world of the television sitcom. Written by Caroline Aherne and Craig Cash, *The Royle Family* was first broadcast on BBC 2 in 1998, before transferring to BBC 1 from the second series onwards. The concept of *The Royle Family* was brilliantly simple, but at the same time far removed from the traditional sitcom formats which we have so far examined, and contradicts Mills'

⁷¹ www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p006dfbc "Geraldine's Romance with Simon - The Vicar of Dibley".

⁷² www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vz_aX7b4kU8 "Alice Tinker Still Believes in the Easter Bunny – The Vicar of Dibley".

⁷³ www.facebook.com/Dawnfrenchfan/videos/1247361465321581 "Two Nuns Are Driving Down the Road In Transylvania".

assertion that “the genre has been described as making ‘no concession to social realism’” (Wagg 1998: 7) (27). Aherne and Cash believed that the funniest things are said by real people in everyday situations, and took this concept as the starting point for their scripts. Philip Wickham refers to *The Royle Family* as “naturalistic” comedy (168). The series featured the Royle family, consisting of Jim Royle (Ricky Tomlinson), his wife Barbara (Sue Johnston), their daughter Denise (Caroline Aherne) and her fiancé and later husband Dave (Craig Cash), the Royle’s son Antony (Ralph Little), and Barbara’s mother Nana, also known as Norma (Liz Smith, who had also played the part of Leticia Copley in *The Vicar of Dibley*). All the “action” took place within the Royle’s working class home in Wythenshawe in Manchester, and mostly consisted in scenes of the family sitting in front of the television, aimlessly discussing whichever programme they were watching, and chatting amongst themselves about the most mundane topics. As the opening credits rolled, the first shot showed Jim Royle turning on the television and settling down in his favourite armchair, preparing for an evening’s viewing. The manner in which this was filmed gave the impression that the camera was the television, and as all the family appeared and sat down, watching the television/camera, viewers quickly realised that this would be a sitcom like no other.

The Royle Family featured no slapstick comedy, no rising action, comedic climax, acrobatic stunts, or falling action, and viewers felt as if they were literally spying on a normal, Mancunian, working-class family in their sitting room. The show was filmed without an audience and without a laughter track, which enhanced the naturalism of the series. Purely through their uneventful conversations, viewers came to know and love each character. Jim was plain-speaking, enjoyed nothing more than complaining about anything and everything, and was somewhat sexist, but underneath his hard exterior, he adored his family. Medhurst describes him as a character “with only his bowels and mouth truly and fully alive” (149). His wife Barbara was the epitome of the put-upon, working-class mother and wife, who manages to hold down a full-time job, and is still expected to do everything at home, whilst Denise was lazy and selfish and possessed an innate ability for doing as little as possible, and Dave was happy to go along with whatever pleased Denise. Antony meanwhile was the family errand-boy, always being ordered to open the door, answer the telephone, go to the off-licence to buy more beer, or to buy Denise or Barbara, both chain-smokers, more “ciggies”. Secondary characters included next-door neighbours Mary Carroll (Doreen Keogh), her antisocial husband Joe (Peter Martin), their shy, overweight daughter Cheryl (Jessica Hynes), and family friend Twiggy (Geoffrey Hughes

– who had also played Onslow in *Keeping up Appearances*).

In a 1997 interview with Michael Parkinson, Caroline Aherne said that she had wanted to write a sitcom in which nothing happened, and this was the concept behind *The Royle Family*. She also mentioned that after the first episode was broadcast, a friend had telephoned her and said, “I thought you said it was a comedy.” Although not containing any of the traditional features of television sitcoms, the normalcy of the setting, and the subtle yet incisive humour of the scripts, meant that families throughout the country saw themselves reflected in *The Royle Family* more than in any other previous sitcom in broadcasting history. Scripted dialogue, while on the surface appearing fatuous and dull, was in fact brilliantly performed, with a comic timing and a deadpan delivery which was second to none. One of the running gags of the series consisted in Barbara asking Dave, Denises’s fiancé, what he had had for his tea. In an episode entitled “Making Ends Meet”,⁷⁴ the following dialogue takes place –

BARBARA. Have you had your tea, Dave?

DAVE. Yeah.

BARBARA. What did you have?

DAVE. Sausage and chips.

BARBARA. Any gravy?

DAVE. No – me mam couldn’t be arsed.

BARBARA. Oh I don’t blame her – it’s nearly summer.

Not only did Aherne and Cash write brilliantly simple comedy, but they also excelled at tapping into viewers’ emotions. Episodes such as “Wedding Day”, which featured emotional scenes between Denise and her family, prior to leaving for the church,⁷⁵ or “Christmas with the Royle Family”, in which Denise goes into labour when her waters break in the bathroom,⁷⁶ were beautifully written and played. During Denises’s labour, comedy seamlessly blends into pathos, as within minutes, a scene in which Jim Royle is sitting in his armchair breaking wind, gives way to an emotional father and daughter

⁷⁴ www.dailymotion.com/video/x5tqxf6 “The Royle Family - Making Ends Meet!” at 19 mins 29 secs.

⁷⁵ www.dailymotion.com/video/x5tqxfa “The Royle Family - The Wedding Day” from 23 mins 30 secs.

⁷⁶ www.dailymotion.com/video/x5vc43n “The Royle Family - 1999 Xmas Special - from 28mins 01secs.

moment, in which Jim and Denise sit together on the floor of the bathroom crying, as he tells his tearful daughter how much he loves her, and reassures her that she will be a wonderful mother. Scenes such as these challenged the concept of stereotypical sitcom characters, as viewers became aware of the social commentary which Aherne and Cash were making through their scripts; the fact that in sitcoms, as in real life, stereotypes do not exist, as even apparent stereotypical characters possess hidden depths. Medhurst eloquently posits that in *The Royle Family*, “just when a character appears to be folding neatly into a stereotypical pattern, a new facet of them is slowly unfurled” (149).

Having consistently been nominated at the BAFTAs, *The Royle Family* won Best Situation Comedy in 2000 and 2007.

Following the success of the series, Caroline Aherne and Craig Cash decided to take their vision of realism in comedy, and the humour of the ordinary, and transform this into a reality show. *Gogglebox*, which first broadcast on Channel 4 in 2013, featured a selected number of members of the public, and filmed them watching television, editing their most amusing remarks about the programmes they were watching, or their remarks about their daily lives, into an hour-long show. Once again, as with *The Royle Family*, viewers were able to “spy” on families watching television, only in this case, the programme was not scripted, and the families involved were not actors. When *Gogglebox* was first screened, Caroline Aherne provided the voiceover narrative, but when she sadly died of cancer in 2016, her scriptwriter partner Craig Cash continued. The families that participate in the programme have become celebrities in their own right, and *Gogglebox* won a BAFTA for Best Reality and Constructed Factual category in 2014, and is still one of Channel Four’s most popular programmes.

As we have seen in this section, sitcoms of the 1990s were both classic and innovative, with increased female protagonism, both in primary roles and in scriptwriting. Issues of class and social aspirations were still considered safe topics, as was religion, although the introduction of the concept of a Church of England female vicar provided a modern twist to the all-male casts of the 60s sitcoms, which had been set in Roman Catholic cathedrals and monasteries, with their more rigid trappings of religiosity and devotion. In *Ab Fab* we also see the first sitcom to reflect the beginnings of a society of superficiality and shallowness, which was to become a societal norm during the 2000s, with the advent of social media. But perhaps the most innovative sitcom concept of this decade was the move towards realism with *The Royle Family*, a groundbreaking format which would foreshadow the birth of a new television genre - the global phenomenon which would be the reality

show.

Although sitcoms foregrounded women during the decades of the 80s and 90s, multiculturalism was barely present. Of all the prime-time sitcoms which we have mentioned in these decades, only one – *Only Fools and Horses* – featured a secondary ethnic minority character. We may therefore posit that in this respect, sitcoms of the 80s and 90s did little to reflect the changing ethnicity of Britain, and this issue will be addressed further in our last section.

5. The Narcissistic Noughties and the Nameless 2010s Change the Sitcom World– Or Do They?

This final section will examine the last two decades of our study, in which technology changed the way we live and think; terrorism continued to blight our lives, and a terrifying, invisible foe forced governments to pull down the shutters on the world, leading to a social experiment of unprecedented proportions, in which millions were confined to their homes for months on end. In this section we will explore innovation in sitcoms of the 2000s and 2010s, and discuss whether the lack of representation of ethnic minorities in British sitcoms improved, or whether there may have been deeper, more political reasons behind scriptwriters' reluctance to find humour in multiculturalism.

5.1. Britain in the 2000s – The Nation Celebrates, The Nation Mourns

Britain celebrated the new millenium with the opening of the Millenium Dome, a vast construction project built in Greenwich, in South London, to house the Millenium Exhibition. The Dome was opened by the Queen shortly before midnight on 31st December 1999, in the presence of Prime Minister Tony Blair, and twelve thousand invited guests, who had been chosen through a lottery system. The Dome exhibition centre closed on 31st December 2000, having failed to cover expenses of a project which had cost British taxpayers £700 million. The Dome was sold the following year, renovated, and reopened as an auditorium for twenty thousand people, now known as the O2 (“Millenium Dome”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*).

Tony Blair's Labour party was re-elected on 7th June 2001 with a majority of one hundred and sixty-seven seats. Blair would eventually become the longest-serving Labour Prime Minister and be elected three times.

On 11th September 2001, history's most devastating terrorist attack took place in the United States. At 08.46 EDT (Eastern Daylight Time), terrorists crashed hijacked American Airlines Flight 11 into the North Tower of the World Trade Centre (WTC) in New York City. Less than twenty minutes later, another hijacked plane – United Airlines Flight 175 crashed into the South Tower. At 09.37 EDT, hijackers aboard American Airlines Flight 77 crashed the plane into the Pentagon in Washington D.C. All passengers and crew of the three hijacked planes perished, as did many thousands of people working within the WTC and in the Pentagon at the time.

Passengers aboard a fourth hijacked plane, United Airlines Flight 93, learnt about the New York and Washington attacks from friends and family, and tried to overpower the hijackers. The plane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania, killing all passengers and crew.

At 09.59 EDT the South Tower of the World Trade Centre collapsed to the ground, and barely half an hour later the North Tower also disintegrated. Hundreds of first responders – police, firemen, and ambulance crew were killed when the towers collapsed. Apocalyptic scenes which the world will never forget were beamed to television sets across the globe, a total of 2,996 people lost their lives, amongst which were sixty-seven British victims, and 11th September 2001 would become forever engraved in people’s memories as one of those fateful dates on which everyone remembers where they were and what they were doing (“9/11 Timeline”, *History*). Two weeks later, the 9/11 attacks would be attributed to the militant Islamic organisation al-Quaeda, whose leader was Osama bin Laden. In a speech made at 8.30 pm EDT on the evening of the attacks, President George Bush Jr. declared that America and her allies would “stand together to win the war against terrorism” (“9/11 Address to the Nation”, *American Rhetoric*).

On 7th October 2001, British forces joined US military strikes against the Taliban leaders in Afghanistan, who had allowed al-Quaeda to use Afghanistan as an operations base. The Taliban were overthrown and replaced with a US-backed administration. Osama bin Laden escaped the attacks and was not found.

The Euro began to be used as legal tender on the streets of twelve ‘eurozone’ countries on 1st January 2002. As we have explained before in this work, Britain did not join the eurozone and continued to trade in pounds sterling.

The Queen’s sister Princess Margaret died on February 9th 2002, at the age of seventy-one, and six weeks later the Queen’s mother, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, also passed away, at the ripe old age of one hundred and one.

Queen Elizabeth II celebrated her Golden Jubilee on 3rd June 2002, just months after mourning the loss of both her sister and her mother. Street parties were held in British territories throughout the world to celebrate fifty years of Her Majesty’s reign and, for the first time in living memory, the gardens of Buckingham Palace were used as a concert venue. “Party at the Palace”, attended by Her Majesty and other members of the Royal Family, featured British performers from the last five decades, enthraling a crowd of around one million people who gathered down The Mall, culminating in an alternative rendition of “God Save The Queen”, performed by Brian May from Queen, serenading the

crowds with a guitar solo from the roof of Buckingham Palace.⁷⁷

In 2003, Operation Shock and Awe – also known as the Iraqi War, or the Second Persian Gulf War began. Despite public opposition, Tony Blair’s Labour government sanctioned and actively participated in the US-led invasion of Iraq, under the premise – later proved to be untrue - that Saddam Hussein’s government was involved in the development of weapons of mass destruction. Saddam was overthrown and captured after nine months and sentenced to death by hanging by an Iraqi court, his execution taking place on 30th December 2006.

On 1st May 2004, eight new eastern European countries joined the European Union, including Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Slovakia. The entrance of Eastern European countries into the EU caused fears in Britain of a renewed immigratory influx. We will see a reference to this in *Citizen Khan* – a sitcom which we will examine in the next decade.

Tony Blair won his third and last term as Prime Minister on 5th May 2005, with a sixty-six seat majority. However, following the revelations that Iraq had not been in possession of chemical weapons, and claims that the government had “sexed-up” the dossier in order to sanction the invasion of Iraq, Blair’s popularity fell to an all-time low, and he eventually resigned on 27th June 2007, being replaced by his former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown.

In 2005, terrorism once again savaged Britain when on 7th July, suicide bombers killed fifty-two people on London’s transport system, injuring more than seven hundred. Three men detonated suicide vests on London Underground trains, and the fourth on a London double-decker bus. The atrocity appeared to be a copy of an attack carried out on 11th March the previous year in the Spanish capital of Madrid, which had killed one hundred and ninety three people, and injured nearly two thousand. It was concluded that Islamic extremists were targeting those countries which had supported the United States as allies during the Second Persian Gulf War. Three weeks later in London, another attack by four suicide bombers was thwarted when their explosives failed to detonate. The fact that the young men involved in these attacks were British-born, from second and third generation immigrant families, caused a significant negative effect amongst British society, leading to an increase of intolerance and suspicion of Muslim citizens, a regrettable situation which was not aided by an apparent reluctance exhibited on the part of many London-based imams to forcefully condemn the attacks, thus conveying an impression of tacit approval.

⁷⁷ www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KNWdhVJq9k “Brian May – ‘God Save The Queen’”.

On 5th December 2005, the Civil Partnership Act of 2004 came into effect, allowing same-sex couples to register a civil partnership which would afford them the same rights as married mixed-sex couples.

Anglo-Russian diplomatic relationships were once again seriously affected when, in November 2006, Alexander Litvinenko – a Russian defector living in London – fell ill and was hospitalised, later dying. Health and security experts concluded that he had been deliberately poisoned with a radioactive substance – polonium, apparently administered in a cup of tea during a meeting at a London hotel. A later public inquiry into his assassination concluded that President Putin probably approved his assassination (“Alexander Litvinenko: Profile of murdered Russian spy”, *BBC News*).

On 29th September 2008, the Dow Jones suffered its biggest single day drop in history, although this would be superseded in March 2020. Years of easy credit and mortgages had led to an ever-expanding real-estate bubble which, as borrowers began to default on repayments, led to an increasing number of government bailouts in the United States. When the Senate voted against a bailout bill, the Dow Jones plummeted, and global markets followed. Several of the main UK banks were also bailed out by the UK government and taxpayers, including the Royal Bank of Scotland and Lloyds TSB.

The Noughties witnessed the rise of the global phenomenon which is social media. On 26th September 2006, Facebook became available to anyone over the age of thirteen with a valid email address. Thus began what we may only describe as a global obsession - an obsession with how many virtual “friends” one has on Facebook, or “followers” on Instagram; with how many “likes” a particular photo or post has received; with comparing someone else’s apparent fairy-tale, perfect lifestyle with one’s own dreary drudge. The younger generations who have grown up in a world where Facebook, Twitter, and later Instagram rule, have been particularly affected by the personal negativity which social media can cause, feeling pressure to look and behave in a certain way, and constantly comparing themselves to others and finding themselves sadly lacking. The anonymity of social media has also increased incidents of bullying, as victims fail to feel safe in their own homes, as the tentacles of social media reach them regardless of where they hide. This notion of achieving perfection, and living our lives through the approbation of others, would be challenged in one of the sitcoms which we will examine in this section – *Miranda* – which would encourage acknowledgement of the sentiment that perfection does not exist, and would celebrate difference.

5.2. Television Sitcoms of the 2000s – Slapstick, Spontaneity, and Sarcasm

The decade of the 2000s introduced the viewing public to sitcoms which would attain cult popularity status and are still repeated to this day. Interestingly, given the obsession with perfection which this decade instigated, the three sitcoms which we have chosen to discuss, embrace dysfunctionality, naturalness, and realism.

Miranda was first broadcast on BBC 2 in 2009, before moving to BBC 1 as from the third series. In a nod to the birth of British television sitcom, and programmes such as *Hancock's Half Hour*, *Miranda* - written by and starring comedian Miranda Hart - also began life as a radio programme, *Miranda Hart's Joke Shop*, first broadcast on Radio 4, before transferring to television. Although many aspects of the sitcom such as the setting, were fictitious, the characterisation was largely based on Hart herself. Miranda owns and lives over a joke shop, and her best friend Stevie (Sarah Hadland) works in the shop with her. The concept of deep female friendship, mutual support, and sisterhood forms the basis of Miranda and Stevie's relationship, as can be appreciated in this clip.⁷⁸ Miranda is tall, gangly, clumsy, and socially awkward; continually falling over and making social *faux-pas*, both behavioural and conversational. Miranda is aware of her social awkwardness, and often shares her despair and embarrassment directly with the television viewer, addressing them by looking into the camera. This dramatic trope enhances the viewers' understanding of and empathy with Miranda, and is known as "breaking the fourth wall" - having originated in stage shows. Hart herself spoke of the fact that she wanted to copy one of her comic idols – Eric Morecambe – who would always look at and address the television audience directly, a comedic tactic which he had learnt whilst working in variety stage shows as a young comedian. In her scripts, Miranda Hart made excellent use of slapstick comedy routines in homage to the institution of the variety show, using props such as a drinking water fountain in an episode entitled "Just Act Normal" from the second series⁷⁹, or the revolving counter of a sushi bar in the episode "Date" from series one.⁸⁰

Miranda's upper class mother Penny (Patricia Hodge), despairs of her daughter ever finding a decent job or a husband, and perpetually embarrasses Miranda with her comments regarding the fact that her daughter does not have a partner. When running as a local councillor, one of her manifest proposals is, "Tax breaks for anyone who will marry

⁷⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXK71kDEfSo "Miranda and Stevie – Count On Me".

⁷⁹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rqEAX77BOI "The Briefcase".

⁸⁰ www.vimeo.com/161043332 "Miranda - Sushi Scene".

Miranda”.

Miranda’s nemesis is her “friend” from boarding school Tilly (Sally Phillips), who appears to have the perfect social and marital life. One of the most popular catchphrases of the series can be found in the characterisation of Tilly, who on receiving a telephone call or text message on her phone, interrupts any conversation in which she is involved to attend to her phone, telling the person she is interrupting to, “bear with...bear with”.⁸¹ However, despite Tilly’s smiling, happy persona, viewers still perceive an element of loneliness beneath her social façade. Miranda’s mother also provided two of the most repeated catchphrases of the sitcom, declaring every activity to be “Such fun!”, and referring to everything and everyone as “what I call...”. The proliferation of catchphrases which this sitcom introduced to the viewers became known collectively amongst the British public as “Mirandaspeak”. The clip which we now include exemplifies many of the aspects of this popular sitcom which we have mentioned.⁸²

Miranda’s love interest is Gary (Tom Ellis), a chef at the local restaurant, and it is through this relationship that the element of seriality is introduced, capturing the audience’s attention to the extent that eventually this became the main topic addressed in the show. Although it is obvious that Miranda and Gary have feelings for each other, the “will they, won’t they” theme of the sitcom means that their on-off relationship, peppered with misunderstandings and mistaken identities, doesn’t culminate until the last episode, in which they marry. However, whenever it appears that Miranda and Gary are becoming closer, the reaction from the live studio audience shows the extent to which the characters have captured the public’s affection, as can be seen in a clip from the episode in which Gary proposes to Miranda.⁸³ Interestingly, following the excitement of the proposal, and after Gary has left, Miranda’s characteristic insecurity is once again foregrounded, as we can see in the following dialogue between herself and Stevie:

(Miranda and Stevie jump up and down with excitement whilst holding hands – suddenly Miranda stops and looks worried).

STEVIE: What?

MIRANDA: He didn’t say ‘I love you’! He’s never ... he’s never actually said ‘I

⁸¹ www.vimeo.com/38188799 “Tilly reads a text”.

⁸² www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIDquJbDFf0. “Excuse – Miranda Episode 5 Preview”.

⁸³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4od6AW5ycA “Gary Proposes to Miranda”.

love you’.

STEVIE: He’s just asked you, in no uncertain terms, to marry him, you fool!

MIRANDA: Yeeesssss!! (*Miranda and Stevie resume jumping up and down whilst holding hands*).

Miranda – both sitcom character and real-life comedian – has been a role model for many women who do not conform to society’s view of perfection and have often felt out of place. During a ten year anniversary show, filmed at the London Palladium, which included chat with members of the cast and clips from the sitcom, Miranda read out emotional letters which she had received from members of the public, thanking her for showing them that they were not alone in their social awkwardness and imperfections. Hart has often affirmed that being that the series was semi-autobiographical, she herself has also felt supported and buoyed by viewers’ reactions.

Our second sitcom of this decade has already been mentioned in 2.2., in which we spoke of the 1950s family-centred sitcom *Life with the Lyons* forming a template for future sitcoms, such as *My Family* and *Outnumbered*, both of which we will now include in this chapter.

My Family was first broadcast on BBC 1 in 2000, and ran for a record-breaking eleven series. This sitcom featured upper-middle class family the Harpers, consisting of Ben Harper (Robert Lindsay), a dentist, his wife Susan (Zoe Wannamaker), who initially works as a tour guide before working in an art gallery, and their three children Nick (Kris Marshall), Janey (Daniela Denby-Ashe) and Michael (Gabriel Thomson). *My Family* was mostly filmed before a live studio audience and therefore the two main sets used were the Harpers living room and kitchen, and Ben’s dental surgery. Exterior shooting tended to take place in Christmas specials, which were not filmed before a live audience.

Almost every aspect of the Harper’s family life could be termed as dysfunctional. Ben is cynical and morose, finds family and work life irritating, and constantly complains; Susan is forthright and feisty, a terrible cook, and doesn’t suffer fools gladly; Janey is vain and shallow, and becomes an unmarried mother at eighteen; Nick is extremely laid-back and somewhat infantile – becoming one of the most popular characters of the sitcom – and Michael, although initially appearing heterosexual, comes out as gay in the penultimate series. The Harpers’ marital life has not followed the traditional pattern either – the couple marrying when Susan was already pregnant with Nick, and openly admitting that Susan’s third pregnancy with Michael was unplanned. In contrast to bedroom scenes in sitcoms of

previous decades, in *My Family*, scenes which take place between Ben and Susan in the bedroom, although often centring on conversation about family matters, also contain references to the couples' still active sex life.

Most of the comic action in *My Family* revolves around verbal humour, with occasional visual humour, usually involving Nick's puerile antics.⁸⁴ Verbal humour mainly consisted in sarcastic one-liners, such as can be seen in the following dialogue:

NICK: D'you think there's an afterlife, Dad?

BEN: (*about to pour himself a whisky, and looking as if he has the weight of the world on his shoulders*) God, I hope not!

Despite the proliferation of sarcasm and cynicism in *My Family*, underlying affection and love could be perceived between family members, in this comedic but realistic take on contemporary family life of the 2000s. During the global pandemic of 2020-21, millions of dysfunctional families in lockdown throughout Britain could see themselves reflected in the Harpers, when this popular sitcom would be repeated once again to great acclaim. The British Comedy Guide also decided to release a series of outtakes from the series, which became very popular and were watched online by millions. The outtakes were introduced by Robert Lindsay, in a humorous characterisation as Ben, and a total of three series of gaffes from the sitcom were released to raise public spirits during 2020.⁸⁵

The last family sitcom which we will feature in this chapter is *Outnumbered*, which began to broadcast on BBC 1 in 2007, running for five series. Although *My Family* had focused on the dysfunctional relationship between parents and children, the three children featured in the sitcom were teenagers and young adults. *Outnumbered* also featured three children, however in an innovative approach to sitcom, the children featured were all below the age of twelve in the first series. The storyline revolved around the family lives of Pete Brockman (Hugh Dennis), a history teacher, his wife Sue (Claire Skinner), a part-time PA, and their three boisterous children – Jake (11) (Tyger Drew-Honey), Ben (7) (Daniel Roche) and Karen (5) (Ramona Marquez). Pete teaches in an inner-city school, and after resigning in protest at the lack of discipline in the school, becomes a supply teacher, thus providing his children with verbal ammunition with which to innocently make him feel

⁸⁴ www.dailymotion.com/video/x31ug1v "My Family - Nick Harper – Chainsaw Madness".

⁸⁵ www.digitalspy.com/tv/a32704111/my-family-outtakes-robert-lindsay/ "My Family outtakes released for the first time".

inadequate. Sue is a typically frazzled working mother, who never appears to be in control of any aspect of her life. Jake is on the cusp of puberty and is a typical pre-teen, obsessed with gadgetry and gaming. Ben is obviously a highly intelligent child who constantly finds himself in scrapes at school and home, and Karen is an opinionated, precocious five-year-old. The naturalistic nature of this extremely humorous sitcom could be perceived and enjoyed by the audience from the first episode, and parents throughout Britain could see themselves clearly reflected.⁸⁶

This sitcom was innovative insofar as, not only was it the first to feature three young children in primary roles, but furthermore it was the first to be partly improvised. Although the adult actors learnt the script, the three children did not. Shortly before the scene was shot, the directors would give the children a set of short instructions and allow them to improvise. Writer, producer, and director Andy Hamilton described the process in the following manner:

While we wanted to create something that was funny, we also wanted it to feel real, so we took the eye contact out and got rid of all things kids don't like. There was no makeup, we ran the set in an informal way and we tried not to keep them hanging around. Before each scene, we would just give them an outline: "Your dad's going to come in, he's going to moan at you, you're going to tell him to leave you alone." And the kids would do it in their own words, in a completely authentic way. (Andy Hamilton, interview with Imogen Tilden, *The Guardian*).

In order to distract the children from the fact that they were acting and ensure maximum normality in the scenes, the youngest children would be provided with a prop to ensure their hands were occupied – Ben was usually filmed playing with a toy, and Karen tended to be drawing whilst she was talking. Conversational improvisation on the children's part led to some of the best lines of the sitcom, as can be perceived in a scene featuring Karen and her grandmother Sandra (Rosalind Ayres), in which the two are talking about female body image and size:

SANDRA: But a woman can be any shape or size she wants.

KAREN: What about a hexagon?

⁸⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kGIFZKITWg. "BBC Outnumbered Series 1 Episode 1".

Outnumbered was also one of the first sitcoms to be filmed on location in an actual family home, rather than on a studio set, a directorial tactic which also ensured that the children felt comfortable in their surroundings.

As the children became more accustomed to the format, and interacting with the adults, they became more adventurous in their improvisation, often resulting in some of the most humorous moments of the sitcom, such as a scene in which Pete and Sue are trying to explain to Ben and Karen what is going to happen at Uncle Bob's funeral, only to find that the children have their own interesting ideas about what takes place.⁸⁷ It was in scenes such as these that Hugh Dennis' talent as a stand-up comedian, accustomed to thinking on his feet, came to the fore.

In later series, as the children grew older and became capable of learning scripts, less improvisation was necessary, however this led to the sitcom becoming merely another family-based comedy, rather than a masterpiece of spontaneity.

As may be perceived in the three sitcoms which we have included in this section, the sitcom brief for scriptwriters during this decade continued to revolve around white families, although interestingly these were now upper middle class. Although the three sitcoms featured coincide in a thematic field of dysfunctional families, the use of the working-class Cockney character seen in family sitcoms such as *Only Fools and Horses* or *Till Death Us Do Part*, has now given way to a higher social class. These upper class characters are not, however, vainly attempting to climb even higher up the social ladder whilst being followed by their embarrassing family, such as is the case with Hyacinth Bucket in *Keeping Up Appearances*. In the sitcoms which we have featured in this section, the families are unapologetically upper middle class, speak RP English, and are comfortably settled within their social strata. Class is not an issue in these sitcoms, in which the humour is found in events and dialogue rather than one's social mobility or lack of said.

As may be perceived from the sitcoms which we have analysed in this section, the decade of the 2000s continued to exhibit a lack of multiculturalism in sitcoms. One exception to this rule can be found however, in *The Kumars at No. 42*, which we will feature in this section, although this was not strictly speaking a sitcom. *The Kumars at No. 42* first broadcast in 2001 on BBC 2, before moving to BBC 1 and later Sky TV. The show ran for seven series and featured Sanjeev Kumar (Sanjeev Bhasjar), who is an aspiring

⁸⁷ www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00k225s. "Outnumbered - Uncle Bob's Funeral"

chat-show host. Sanjeev lives with his father Ashwin (Vincent Ebrahim), mother Madhuri (Indira Joski) and grandmother Sushil ‘Ummi’ (Meera Syal). Sanjeev’s dotting father has converted the family living room into a television studio, so that his son may invite his “friends” to be interviewed; these include household names such as Jerry Hall, Stephen Fry, Donny Osmond or Jennifer Saunders (writer and star of *Ab Fab*).⁸⁸ The interviews do not however run smoothly, as Sanjeev’s family insist on joining in. *The Kumars at No. 42* was unafraid of addressing politically incorrect topics, as can be seen in the following dialogue which takes place during the interview with Jennifer Saunders, in which other countries’ versions of *Ab Fab* are discussed:

SUSHI: Well, you know Jennifer, there’s no point in doing a version in India, it would only run for an episode. The women would get drunk, take drugs, sleep with lots of men, and they’d get stoned to death at the end.

As *The Kumars at No. 42* was partly scripted and partly improvised, it is not clear if this remark was included in the original script or not, however it was well known that Meera Syal, who played Sushi, improvised considerably.

The Kumar’s at No. 42 won International Emmy Awards in 2002 and 2003, and has been included in this section as an example of one of the few introductions of multicultural comedy into the television schedules, although the BBC comedy website describes it as “a mix of sitcom, scripted chat, genuine interview, and occasional improvisation”, so therefore it is not purely sitcom (“The Kumars at No. 42”, *BBC*).

5.3. Britain in the 2010s – The Nation Rallies, The Nation Reels

A General Election on 6th May 2010 resulted in a hung parliament, and an uneasy coalition government was formed between David Cameron’s Conservative Party and Nick Clegg’s Liberal Democrats. Although the Liberal Democrats’ election manifesto had contained a promise not to increase university tuition fees, the coalition governments’ decision to allow universities to triple their tuition fee cap, led to student protests and riots throughout Britain.

⁸⁸ www.youtube.com/watch?v=gPaFyADP69w “Jennifer Saunders 2004 interview The Kumars at No. 42”.

On 29th April 2011, Prince William married Catherine Middleton at Westminster Abbey. Catherine came from a middle-England family with no royal connections and had met William when they were both studying History of Art at St. Andrews University. The newlyweds were given the official title of Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. Their first child Prince George Alexander Louis was born on 22nd July 2013; Princess Charlotte Elizabeth Diana came into the world on 2nd May 2015, and their third child, Prince Louise Arthur Charles was born on 23rd April 2018.

United States SEALs killed Osama bin Laden on 2nd May 2011, during an ambush carried out on his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, his body being buried at sea.

In February 2012, Queen Elizabeth II became the second British monarch to celebrate a Diamond Jubilee – the first being Queen Victoria in 1897. The Diamond Jubilee pageant was held on the River Thames on 3rd June, comprising a maritime parade of more than 1,000 boats from around the Commonwealth. The Queen and other members of the Royal Family joined the pageant aboard the royal barge – The Spirit of Chartwell.⁸⁹

London hosted the 27th modern Olympic Games in July 2012, becoming the first city to host the modern Games three times, having previously done so in 1908 and 1948. The opening ceremony, devised by filmmaker Danny Boyle, featured a surprise appearance by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, in a sketch with James Bond (Daniel Craig), which had been filmed at Buckingham Palace, and was played to the audience immediately prior to the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh's entrance into the auditorium. The sketch also featured the Queen's beloved corgis.⁹⁰

On 13th July 2013, the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act was passed, allowing same-sex marriages in England and Wales, also becoming legal in Scotland in 2014, and the Republic of Ireland in 2015.

Lee Rigby, a drummer with the 2nd Battalion, Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, was murdered near his barracks in Woolwich on 22nd May 2013. His murderers, although raised as Christians, had recently converted to Islam, and this barbaric attack marked the beginning of a new, abhorrent form of terrorism, carried out by "lone wolf" Islamic extremists. Rumours abounded that vulnerable young men were being radicalised in certain mosques and Muslim schools throughout Britain, and over the next few years, some of these were closed by the authorities.

⁸⁹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHF7viVJnJg "Diamond Jubilee River Pageant: The Best Bits".

⁹⁰ www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AS-dCdYZbo "James Bond and The Queen London 2012 Performance".

A referendum held in Scotland on Scottish independence on 18th September 2014, led to a result of 55% preferring to remain within the United Kingdom, whilst 45% of Scots citizens favoured independence.

NATO formally ended combat operations in Afghanistan in December 2014, thus transferring full responsibility to the Afghan government.

The General Election of 7th May 2015, saw the Conservatives win a twelve seat majority, allowing them to govern without forming another coalition. One of David Cameron's manifesto promises had been to allow a referendum of Britain's membership of the European Union; this election success meaning that he was now obliged to fulfil his promise.

On 9th September 2015, Queen Elizabeth II became Britain's longest reigning monarch, celebrating her sapphire Jubilee on 6th February 2017.

During the campaign prior to Britain's referendum vote on membership of the EU, on 16th June 2016 Labour MP Jo Cox was shot and stabbed to death by a far-right extremist, Thomas Mair. Over the course of some years, Mair had begun to display extremist tendencies, and now believed that a majority vote of "Remain" in the referendum, would lead to ever-increasing immigration. He singled out Jo Cox – a passionate pro-immigration advocate for remaining in the EU – as his victim. The jury took just ninety minutes to decide that Mair was guilty, and he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

The increasingly febrile "Brexit" debate was decided on 23rd June 2016, when the British people voted by 52% to 48% to leave the European Union. The following day David Cameron – a Remainer – resigned, and was replaced by his then Home Secretary Theresa May – also a Remainer, who was now faced with the unenviable task of carving out an acceptable Brexit deal with the EU's chief negotiators, Jean-Claude Juncker and Michel Barnier.

Sadly, Brexit divided the nation; the recriminations between "Brexiters" and "Remainers" grew increasingly toxic, and affected family relationships, friendships, and employment. During the months following the referendum, Brexit was the most discussed and commented political event in recent British history.

Although Britain was now under the mandate of her second female Prime Minister, evidence of gender inequality in Britain was still prevalent. According to a 2016 Financial Times article, only seven of the top one hundred companies on the London Stock Exchange boasted a female CEO ("Just who are the 7 women bosses of the FTSE 100?", *The Financial Times*), and in 2017, the BBC published a list of earnings of the

corporation's top presenters – leading to a public outcry over the gender pay gap between male and female presenters, which has since been addressed (“BBC pay: the 2017-18 list of star salaries in full”, *BBC News*).

In 2017, Islamic extremists targeted Britain once again on three separate occasions, between the months of March and June. On 22nd March, five people were killed and forty-five injured, when Khalid Masood drove a car along the pavement on Westminster Bridge, before crashing into the railings of the Palace of Westminster, and attacking an unarmed policeman, Keith Palmer, who tried to apprehend him. Masood stabbed and killed PC Palmer before being shot and killed by armed police. Exactly two months later, a suicide bomber detonated a homemade bomb during an Ariana Grande concert at Manchester Arena, killing twenty-two and injuring one hundred and sixteen. On 3rd June, terrorists drove a van into pedestrians at Borough Market in London, before leaving the vehicle and attacking people with knives. Eight people were killed in the attack, before armed police arrived on the scene and shot the terrorists dead.

Following a General Election on 8th June 2017, Theresa May formed a minority government with the Democratic Unionist Party, however the complicated negotiations involved in Brexit, which she failed to pass through Parliament, led to her narrowly surviving a no-confidence vote in January 2019, and on 24th May Theresa announced her resignation, eventually leaving office on 7th June 2019 and being replaced by Boris Johnson, who was elected Conservative Party leader on 23rd July of the same year.

On 19th May 2018, Prince Harry married American actress Rachel Meghan Markle in St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle, and the couple became the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. Their first child, Archie Mountbatten-Windsor was born on 6th May 2019, however in January 2020 the Duke and Duchess would announce that they were stepping back from their roles as senior royals, as they wished to be financially independent. Harry and Meghan currently live in Santa Barbara, California and are expecting their second child. The scandal surrounding Harry and Meghan's decision, believed to have caused acrimony within the Royal Family, was dubbed “Megxit” by the British press.

The General Election of 12th December 2019, saw Boris Johnson's Conservative party achieving an overall majority, whilst Labour returned its worst results since 1935. The Liberal Democrats, whose election manifesto had revolved around cancelling Brexit, achieved only eleven seats. On 20th December, MP's voted in favour of Britain's withdrawal agreement from the European Union, which formally took place on 31st January 2020.

The subject of racism was once more headline news when in May 2020, George Floyd, a forty-six year old African American, died from asphyxiation whilst being restrained by a white police officer in Minneapolis. Floyd's death sparked worldwide protests by the Black Lives Matter movement, and reignited the debate on racism and unconscious bias against "the other" on the part of white supremacists, that we have seen previously in this work. Black barrister Alexandra Wilson received an apology from the head of courts service, when she was mistaken for a defendant three times in one day, being challenged by a security officer, a clerk, and a solicitor ("Black barrister mistaken for defendant three times gets apology", *BBC News*).

An announcement by the Chinese authorities, on 1st January 2020, that they were investigating a new strain of viral pneumonia in the Chinese city of Wuhan, would herald the beginning of a global pandemic, which is still raging at the time of writing this research work. Countries worldwide have experienced lockdown, with only essential shops open, strict curfews and movement restrictions, and economic freefall. World tourism has been curtailed; sporting events, concerts, and festivals have been cancelled; theatres, cinemas, and museums closed; children have been denied schooling; millions have been furloughed or made redundant, and grieving relatives have been prevented from being comforted, or attending funerals.

In contrast to the negative aspects of social media which we have previously explored, during the pandemic, social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram have been utilised positively by many, and have aided the mental health and wellbeing of millions, in particular those who have been shielding, that live alone. Popular actors whom we have already mentioned in this work, such as Miranda Hart (*Miranda*), and Dawn French (*The Vicar of Dibley*), have used social media to acknowledge the effect which loneliness and social isolation causes in the vulnerable, and have repeatedly encouraged those who are suffering to seek professional help. Dawn French also filmed a series of "online sermons" in her characterisation as Geraldine Grainger which, during a time of fear and uncertainty when many had found succour in religion and prayer, led to viewers' consciousnesses blurring the lines between actor and sitcom persona, as we have mentioned previously.

Furthermore, artists such as Gary Barlow (Take That), have raised spirits with online music sessions. Between March 2020 and March 2021, Barlow released a total of ninety-

eight videos, known as “The Crooner Sessions”. Each video featured Gary duetting with a different artist or group, such as Elton John, Jack Savoretti, or Alesha Dixon.⁹¹

Scientists across the world have worked night and day against the clock to develop vaccines which would protect against this invisible enemy, now known as coronavirus. Britain has suffered three almost consecutive national lockdown periods between March 2020 and April 2021. At the time of writing, a phased roadplan back to a “new normal” is taking place, aided by the fact that Britain has instigated an aggressive vaccination plan, seeing this as the only possible road back to societal, economic, and political recovery.

The decade of the 2010s saw much cause for patriotic celebration, witnessing a royal marriage, two Royal Jubilees, and London’s hugely successful hosting of the Olympics. This theme of national unity continued in the favourable result of the Scottish referendum, however the outcome of the EU referendum caused the largest ideological divide which British society has ever seen. Furthermore, the end of the decade saw the initiation of the global coronavirus pandemic, which has heresofar changed the manner in which global society lives, loves, and loses. In the last section of this essay, we will examine popular sitcoms from 2010 onwards, and discuss whether they constituted an accurate portrayal of British society of the decade, and we will also explore the way sitcom writing and staging has managed to adapt to recent, unprecedented times.

5.4. Television Sitcoms in the 2010s – Mums, Mayhem, and Mosques.

The perennial popularity of the family-based sitcom continued into the 2010s, as may be perceived in the selection of sitcoms which we will offer in this final section.

Mrs Brown’s Boys, created, written by, and starring Irish comedian Brendan O’Carroll, was first broadcast on RTÉ radio in Ireland, before transferring to RTÉ One and later to BBC 1. *Mrs Brown’s Boys*, although an innovative idea, made use of centuries old theatrical traditions of slapstick and drag – Brendan O’Carroll playing Agnes Brown, the foul-mouthed, family-minded matriarch of a large, southern Irish family.

Although women were first permitted to perform on the English stage during the early 1660s after the Restoration of King Charles II, previously female roles were performed by males. However, the quintessentially British tradition of the pantomime continues to feature men playing the comedic role of the “dame”, and has also often featured nubile

⁹¹ www.youtube.com/watch?v=EqNxH9bdoC8 “The Boy Does Nothing ft Alesha Dixon” The Crooner Sessions #29

young women in the role of the young prince. Therefore, the concept of “drag” has been central to British theatre, but rarely used in television sitcoms. Sharon Lockyer states that, “[a]s a popular comedic technique drag offers the comic performer the opportunity to play with power and status differentials” (17), and this is undoubtedly true of O’Carroll’s characterisation of Mrs Brown, whose transformation into a girdle-wearing, apron-clad, opinionated Irish Mammy is all too believable.

We have spoken previously of the 1950s sitcom *Life with the Lyons*, which featured Bebe Daniels, Ben Lyons, and their real-life family in a sitcom which mirrored events in their family life. In *Mrs Brown’s Boys*, O’Carroll also uses this concept, although storylines do not mirror real life. Not only is Mrs Brown the much-loved matriarch of a large, noisy family, but O’Carroll’s real-life family are so heavily involved in his sitcom creation, that in total eight members of his family have roles in *Mrs Brown’s Boys*, although their roles do not coincide with their real-life family relationships.

Mrs Brown’s Boys features graphic language, sexual innuendo, slapstick comedy, complicated stunts, song-and-dance routines, and heavily ad-libbed scripts, in a format which could be described as quasi-pantomine. It is filmed before a live audience but in a break from tradition, in the opening scenes in which the announcer can be heard saying, “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to *Mrs Brown’s Boys*!” the camera pans round the studio so that the viewer can see not only the audience, but the three sets which are used – Mrs Brown’s kitchen, the family’s living room, and the local pub, Foley’s Bar. The various cameras which are used during filming, together with studio runners are also clearly visible.⁹²

As Mrs Brown, O’Carroll continually breaks the fourth wall, speaking directly to the television viewers at home and also to the studio audience. Furthermore, as creator and scriptwriter, [s]he delights in exerting total control over the show, his/her fellow actors, and even the television crew, often walking beyond the studio set as [s]he is talking, knowing that the cameramen will be forced to follow. This allows the audience at home a glimpse of the television equipment and paraphernalia used in a sitcom studio, and also serves to enforce the fallacious aspect of the television sitcom, thus contrasting with the realism of sitcoms such as *The Royle Family* or *Outnumbered*, which we have seen in previous decades.

As mentioned above, *Mrs Brown’s Boys* relies heavily on slapstick comedy and

⁹² www.dailymotion.com/playlist/x670n1 “Mrs Brown’s Boys Series 3 Episode 3 – Mammys Break” from 00mins 17secs to 00mins 21secs.

physical stunts, which always involves Mrs Brown herself. One of the running gags of the series which delighted audiences could be found in the Christmas Special episodes. In each Christmas episode, family friend Buster Brady – played by O’Carroll’s son Danny – provides Mrs Brown with a “top of the range” Christmas tree. As Buster is the Irish equivalent of the shady, dodgy-dealer Cockney stereotype, the audience knows that the tree will always have some defect. This leads to heightened audience anticipation whenever Mrs Brown approaches the tree.⁹³

As the matriarch of a large Irish family, despite her foul language and short temper, Agnes Brown adores her family, and recognises the importance of family love and unity. Often episodes end with Mrs Brown sitting at her kitchen table, directly addressing the audience, in a reflective moment in which the character dispenses with swearing and innuendo, to make a moral commentary on the importance of love and acceptance. In what may be perceived as veiled criticism of both Catholic church and Irish government – homosexuality not having been legalised in the Republic of Ireland until 1993 – two of Mrs Brown’s sons are homosexual – Rory, who is a hairdresser, and Trevor, who is a priest. Rory is openly homosexual, although Mrs Brown herself does not realise this until he tells her, whereas Trevor’s homosexuality is insinuated. O’Carroll himself has spoken of the fact that he has rejected a deal for a version of Mrs Brown’s Boys to be broadcast in Russia, as Russian negotiators insisted that homosexual characters had to be removed from the series. O’Carroll reports that he was told ‘no gay, absolutely no gay’ and replied, ‘no gay, no show’ (“Brendan O’Carroll refused ‘nice fee’ to cut Mrs Brown’s Boys gay character”, *The Irish Times*).

As with *Life with the Lyons*, *Mrs Brown’s Boys* has also moved from radio to television to film, and pre-pandemic was also touring Australia and New Zealand, playing to packed stadiums normally reserved for rock stars. Interestingly however, the show is not popular with either the television critics or the Irish people. Critics believe the show relies on aspects of comedy which are no longer considered viable in the contemporary sitcom world, and the Irish people believe that the portrayal of Mrs Brown and her family is an outdated, politically incorrect, caricature of contemporary reality. However, on transferring to BBC 1, the show swiftly acquired cult status amongst the British public and would be awarded a BAFTA in 2012 for Best Situation Comedy, and has won the award for Best Comedy at the National Television Awards (NTAs), for three consecutive years as from

⁹³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ABKHQjrMnK “Mammy’s Tree Trouble – Mrs Brown’s Boys: Christmas Specials 2014”.

2013, and then again in 2017.

The next sitcom which we will examine in this final section, innovated not merely in the portrayal of family dynamics, but also in the use of comedy in sitcoms. *Mum*, first broadcast in 2016, remained on BBC 2 throughout the three series. *Mum* told the story of Cathy (Lesley Manville), recently widowed and still grieving, and her somewhat selfish family; her son Jason (Sam Swainsbury), and his girlfriend Kelly (Lisa McGrillis), Cathy's brother Derek (Ross Boatman), and his snobbish recently divorced girlfriend, Pauline (Dorothy Atkinson); and Cathy's husband's parents, Maureen (Marlene Sideaway) and Reg (Karl Johnson), whom Cathy continues to look after following her husband's demise. Cathy and her family live in Chingford, a quiet suburb on the boundaries of north-east London and Essex.

Over the course of the first series, Cathy becomes aware that she harbours feelings for neighbour Michael (Peter Mullan), who had been her husband's life-long best friend. The viewers also perceive that divorced Michael has probably had feelings for Cathy for years, even whilst her husband was still alive.

Although initial characterisation of Cathy's family members appears to adhere to stereotyping, as with *The Royle Family*, each family member's character eventually unfurls to the extent that viewers become aware of the fears and insecurities of the person behind the persona. Interestingly however, this does not take place until the last episodes and for most of the eighteen episodes, viewers are longing for Cathy to speak her mind, rather than quietly keeping her self-centred family content, whilst still grieving deeply herself. Despite her sorrow, Cathy is always quietly reserved, kind, and thoughtful, and the realism with which Lesley Manville portrays her, contrasts with the ridiculousness of her family members and their petty worries. In the characterisation of Cathy, we also see a move away from the portrayal of the independent, strong-minded, working woman which had been so popular since the 1980s, as in this sitcom, the primary female role reverts to that of mother, housewife, and carer. During an era in which children are finding it increasingly difficult to become financially independent, and elderly parents are living longer, the role of primary carer of both young adult children and parents or in-laws usually falls to the woman, thus the portrayal of Cathy was such that many women can identify with her.

Mum does not feature slapstick comedy or overt visual humour, but verbal humour. Interestingly, the comedic lines of the script are reserved for members of Cathy's family, as can be seen in the following dialogue which takes place in Cathy's sitting room on New Years Eve:

MAUREEN: Well, if it was up to me, I'll tell you now Cathy, I'd love to have sex with a black man or a nice Jew.

REG: How much have you had to drink?

MAUREEN: I'm just saying that before I die I'd like to have sex with a black man and a Jew.

CATHY (*gently*): We're not talking about black people or Jewish people or anything like that.

MAUREEN: I *know*, but I've never had sex with one.

REG: Good! You'd eat 'im alive.

MAUREEN: Oh shut up!

REG: (*muttering to himself*) As if the Jews haven't got enough to worry about without you trying to sleep with them!

In contrast to the exaggerated comedy seen in the characterisations of Cathy's family members, the burgeoning relationship between Cathy and Michael uses gentle humour, interspersed with pregnant pauses and longing glances, neither of them initially finding the courage to voice their feelings for one another.⁹⁴

On a subliminal level, Cathy's son Jason is aware of Michael's feelings for Cathy, and continually thwarts their attempts to spend time together, even resorting at times to openly warning Michael to leave his mother alone as she is still grieving for his father. It is only in the last episode that the viewer becomes aware that beneath Jason's egocentric façade lies a young man who fears that having lost his father, he will also lose his mother to another man.

The slow burn of Cathy and Michael's relationship, in which any potential breakthroughs are always interrupted by some member of the family, affords poignancy and pathos to this sitcom which led to viewers laughing through tears, whilst willing the couple to confess their true feelings to each other. The paradox of this however, was that once they had done so, and had navigated the complicated situation of telling the family of their relationship, the storyline lost its "*raison d'être*", and therefore these last episodes would mark the end of the sitcom. In 2017, *Mum* won The Broadcasting Press Guild Award for Best Comedy,

⁹⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=2y5spotAU-nI "Cathy and Michael: Grow Old With You".

and in 2019 the series would win three BAFTAs – Best Scripted Comedy, Best Female Comedy Performance for Lesley Manville (Cathy) and Best Male Comedy Performance for Peter Mullan (Michael). Bearing in mind that neither Cathy nor Michael’s scripted dialogue was overtly humorous, these awards demonstrate the critical acclaim which *Mum* achieved.

We have previously mentioned the lack of multiculturalism in British sitcoms, and once again the sitcoms which we have explored so far in this last section have featured no multicultural characters. We will now examine a recent exception to this rule in the guise of *Citizen Khan*, written by and starring Adil Ray. Ray is second-generation British, of mixed Asian and African heritage, and is a well known comedian, writer, radio and television presenter.

Citizen Khan, first broadcast on BBC 1 in 2012, focuses on interfering, loud-mouthed, patriarchal British Pakistani Mr Khan (Adil Ray), and his long-suffering family, which includes his wife Razia (Shobu Kapoor), and his daughters Shazia (Maya Sondhi), and Alia (Bhavna Limbachia), together with Shazia’s husband Amjad Malik (Abdullah Afzal). Khan is an opinionated, self-appointed community leader. In a scene which is mildly reminiscent of Alf Garnett in *Till Death Us Do Part*, the irony of which is not lost on the viewer, Khan complains about immigration in the following dialogue:

KHAN: Too many bloody immigrants coming to this bloody country!

SHAZIA: *You’re* an immigrant, Dad!

KHAN: I’m not an immigrant, sweetie! I’ve been here thirty years! Immigrants are the Eastern Europeans – coming over here taking our jobs! Jobs meant for us Pakistanies!

SHAZIA (*horrified*): DAD!

KHAN: All right! *British* Pakistanies.

AMJAD: So, we are British, not Pakistani?

KHAN: Look! We work hard, we go to mosque, we pray to Allah five times a day, how much more British can you get?

As Britain has evolved over the decades, political correctness has become central to today’s liberal British society. The concept of political correctness has been examined repeatedly in this work, and we have included opinions of actors such as Sir David Jason or John Cleese, on the difficulties of creating humour without causing offence in

contemporary society. Given these circumstances, and the lack of multiculturalism which we have encountered in British sitcoms, we may posit that white, middle and upper middle-class British scriptwriters, fearful of inviting disapproval from certain sections of society, have preferred to continue to find humour in the white British working-class, middle, and upper-middle class— rather than any ethnic minority group. However, we may then argue that once the scriptwriters were themselves members of those minority groups, fears of causing offence would be lessened, and multicultural sitcoms would gain prominence and popularity in British television. Despite this, when *Citizen Khan* was first broadcast in 2012, although written by and starring a Muslim, following the first episode, the BBC received one hundred and eighty-five complaints, including claims that the show was “a tasteless depiction of Islam”, and featured racist stereotyping of Muslims (“Sitcom Citizen Khan prompts 185 complaints to the BBC”, *BBC News*). One of the scenes which provoked most complaints featured Mr Khan’s younger daughter Alia, who can be seen sitting at the kitchen table reading a magazine. On hearing her father about to enter the kitchen, she hurriedly puts her hijab on, picks up the Koran, and begins to read it whilst swaying back and forth.⁹⁵ Despite the fact that many Muslims commented on the accuracy of the depiction, many others were extremely offended.

An article written by Farouk A. Peru, a teacher of Islamic Studies at King’s College London for the online Muslim Institute, responded to these accusations of racist stereotyping and defended *Citizen Khan* stating that, “ ...I hope Muslims who were offended would understand that, if we wish Islam to be part of the fabric of British society, we must be prepared to have our cultural norms questioned and sometimes lampooned” (“In Defence of Citizen Khan”, *MuslimInstitute*).

Having invited heated debate, *Citizen Khan* continues to divide Muslim opinion in Britain, despite winning numerous awards, such as Best Comedy Programme at the Royal Television Society awards in both 2013 and 2014.

As we have mentioned previously, the restrictive measures which were implanted at the beginning of March 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic, meant that normal filming of sitcoms had to be curtailed. At a loss as to how to proceed, or how long this situation would last, television broadcasting companies took the decision to recur to favourite sitcoms of past decades, which have included many of those featured in this work, such as *Miranda*, *My Family*, *Outnumbered*, and *Fawlty Towers*, which is currently enjoying a

⁹⁵ www.dailymotion.com/video/x601pbl “Citizen Khan S01E01 Wedding Venue” from 01mins 26 secs to 01mins 50secs.

rerun of all episodes on BBC 1, including the episode entitled “The Germans” which we have mentioned in 3.4.

In this repeat episode, although Basil’s encounter with the German guests was included, Major Gowen’s shocking, racist reference to the Indian cricket team had been cut from the episode, in a piece of editing which was so cleverly executed that viewers would never have realised unless they had seen the original, as I had done whilst researching this work. Interestingly, it was still deemed acceptable for Basil to call one of the German guests a “stupid Kraut”. We may posit that maybe the BBC’s reasoning behind this decision was that Basil may be excused as he was suffering from concussion, however Major Gowen may not.

This television scheduling ploy of repeating classic favourite sitcoms has proved beneficial for three reasons; firstly, the public’s longing for normality was assuaged as they revisited popular characters and sitcoms; secondly, in many cases older members of the family could introduce younger generations to the delights of sitcoms of their youth; and thirdly, we must not underestimate the endorphin boost which is provided through laughter.

During the initial lockdown in Britain, however, two actors took the decision to make active use of the topic of the coronavirus pandemic in an innovative new sitcom. *Staged*, first broadcast mid-pandemic in June 2020, was created by and starred David Tennant and Michael Sheen, together with their respective wives, Georgia and Anna; all participants playing themselves in two series of short, fifteen minute episodes. The storyline revolved around the fact that Michael and David had supposedly been rehearsing a West End play together before lockdown, and were now attempting to continue rehearsals with other cast members via Zoom. The sitcom’s director, Simon Evans, also played himself, in the role of the hapless director of the play in question, who has persuaded the cast to continue rehearsals online. The spoof rehearsals which took place in the sitcom were interspersed with interruptions from children and wives, together with meetings with Simon, and the comedy could be found both in Tennant and Sheen’s brilliant portrayals of two egocentric, “luvvie” actors, their catty, “private” Zoom conversations about Simon’s lack of directorial talent, and in the realism of the situation. Although the first two episodes featured only the main characters, as the series gained popularity, fellow actors were happy to make humorous cameo appearances. This fact heightened audience anticipation as to which famous face would appear in each new episode. In one episode, in which Sheen and Tennant are arguing over who should be billed first when the play eventually opens in the

West End, they ask advice from Dame Judi Dench, in the following dialogue:

JUDI: Well, what was it to begin with?

DAVID: David Tennant – Michael Sheen.

JUDI: Well, that’s absurd!

MICHAEL: That’s what *I* said!

JUDI: I mean, when in doubt it’s alphabetical order.

DAVID (*shouting*): That is not a fucking rule!

JUDI: David John Tennant! You’re going the right way for a smacked bottom!

MICHAEL: He’s been like this *all* the way through, Judi!

DAVID: Now Judi – it says here – your name came before Steve Coogan’s in
Philomena.

JUDI: Yes.

DAVID: Before Billy Connolly on *Mrs Brown*?

JUDI: Yes.

DAVID: Well, they all come before you alphabetically.

JUDI: They do.

DAVID: So why does your name come first?

JUDI: I’m Judi Dench.⁹⁶

During a total of fourteen episodes over two series, other actors who appeared with Tennant and Sheen via Zoom included Cate Blanchett, Samuel L. Jackson, Woopie Goldberg, Ewan McGregor, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, and Hugh Bonneville, all playing exaggerated caricatures of themselves.

The final episode was broadcast on 25th January 2021, and showed Michael and David preparing to leave their homes after lockdown. The episode, entitled “Until They Get Home”, featured the only exterior shots of the sitcom, in which David and Georgia were sitting together in their car in a supermarket car park, and Michael is outside the car talking to them through a closed window.

Shortly before the first series was aired, BBC Director of Content Charlotte Moore spoke of the broadcaster’s responsibility to produce moments of humour and light relief during such trying times (“Staged is more than just actors in lockdown”, NewsLetter).

⁹⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSnhOAICka0 “Who comes first? Judi Dench decides - Staged” from 0mins 1sec to 0mins 31secs.

Staged was the only sitcom to reflect the actual pandemic situation, and won Best Comedy at the Broadcasting Press Guild Awards in March 2021.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this final Master's project has been to explore the manner in which Britain's socio-cultural and political evolution, from the 1950s to the present day, has influenced the production of the nation's favourite television genre – that of the situation comedy. As has been illustrated in the main body of this work, many sitcoms of the past seven decades have presented a faithful reflection of the changing face of Britain.

In our perusal of 1950s comedy, we may posit that sitcoms such as *Hancock's Half Hour* or *The Army Game* accurately reflected post-war, socially structured, Establishment-led Britain. In the social aspirations of Anthony Aloysius St John Hancock we saw the importance of class in 1950s Britain, a sitcom topic which would recur consistently during the following decades.

Although the decade of the 60s was the most dynamic, modernising decade of our study, the eclectic mix of 1960s situation comedies which we have examined, has reflected both Britain's rapid development during the decade, and a yearning for simpler times. Sitcoms such as *Dad's Army* featured nostalgic comedy and an older cast, which belied the image of swinging, youthful Britain, whilst sitcoms such as *Oh Brother*, although portraying a move away from the notion of ecclesiastical authority at a time when church attendance, particularly amongst the younger generations, was falling, still did not reflect the importance which youth was afforded in 1960s society.

The topic of social class was once again prominent in sitcoms such as *Steptoe and Son*, which reprised the theme of class consciousness which had been seen in the 50s in the partnership of Tony Hancock and Sid James, through the father and son relationship of Albert and Harold Steptoe and the ignominious sitcom setting of a junk yard.

As far as Britain's burgeoning multiculturalism was concerned, we have seen that during the 1960s, race was now considered an appropriate topic for comedy material. However, we have also witnessed that the humour used to address the theme of race, even with the excuse of irony, is today no longer acceptable. Unfortunately, we may also conclude that although totally inappropriate, sitcoms such as *Till Death Us Do Part* were also accurately reflecting the socio-cultural and political face of 1960s Britain.

The 1970s witnessed considerable societal change and this can be perceived in the sitcoms which we have included in this decade. In general, sitcoms of the 70s aimed to reflect the changing face of Britain; *Love Thy Neighbour* and *Rising Damp* introduced primary roles for black actors, whilst *Are You Being Served* featured sitcom's first openly

gay character.

Although the decade was synonymous with feminism, misogyny and machism were evident in 1970s Britain, and we may argue that sitcoms such as *Terry and June* or *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em* attempted to temper this undesirable societal aspect, with the characterisation of infantile, clumsy men. However, female characters in these sitcoms did not reflect women's increasing independence, and although women were now featuring in primary sitcom roles, it was not until mid-decade, with the character of Sybil Fawcety in *Fawcety Towers*, that the dominant primary female role was introduced into the sitcom world.

We may also perceive a desire to tackle the contentious topic of racism in the introduction of 1970s sitcoms such as *Rising Damp* and *Love Thy Neighbour*, which both featured primary black characters who belonged to a higher social class than their white, racist counterparts. However, we may further conclude that the ironic humour used to denounce racist attitudes in these sitcoms, was often lost on those who would most benefit from a more inclusive outlook.

Feminism came to the fore in the 1980s, and this was reflected in the first all-female sitcom – *Birds of a Feather*. *Only Fools and Horses* and *Just Good Friends* also featured strong, independent women in a move away from stereotypical female characterisations of busty, mentally challenged blonde or nagging, downtrodden wife. Unfortunately, not all 80s sitcoms portrayed an accurate reflection of the progress towards gender equality which Britain was experiencing, as we have seen in our examination of *'Allo 'Allo*, which continued to objectify and stereotype women in a sitcom which, although popular, appeared far removed from the era in which it was broadcast.

During the course of the research which has been carried out for this work, it has become obvious that sitcoms do not always accurately reflect societal progress. By the time we reach the 1990s, a pattern is seen to emerge of classic mixed with the innovative, and this can be perceived throughout this essay. Television audiences will always enjoy harking back to times gone by, and nostalgia is an important collective cultural emotion. Old, trusted sitcom formats induce a sensation of safety, warmth, and belonging, and this may be perceived in the popularity of repeat episodes of favourite sitcoms, which are always well received, not only during global pandemics. Whilst society may change at lightening speed, innovation in sitcoms will always come slowly, and be interspersed with the classic as, maybe due to the ever-changing, frenetic world in which they live, television viewers revel in the comfort of the familiar, which provides light relief and reiteration of

the notion of national identity.

Classic comedy of the 1990s included sitcoms such as *Keeping Up Appearances*, which found humour in the age-old topic of the conflict between ones social aspirations and ones social reality, in the character of Hyacinth Bucket and her feckless family. As a further example of the juxtaposition of classic and new, the 1990s would also produce perhaps one of the most innovative sitcoms of this research work, *The Royle Family*, which not only introduced absolute realism to the sitcom world, but was also the first sitcom to find humour in characters doing nothing, rather than featuring physical stunts and implausible plots.

The 1990s sitcom *The Vicar of Dibley* combined classic and new in the same sitcom; reverting to a popular theme of the 1960s – that of the religious orders – whilst providing a contemporary, feminist twist in the character of Geraldine Grainger, the new female vicar of Dibley, reflecting the ordainment of female vicars into the Church of England, which had become law in 1994.

During the 2000s, the family-themed sitcom continued its perennial popularity, with an emphasis on the dysfunctionality of family life. The traditional concept of the British family as comprising husband, wife, and two children had shifted in recent years. By this decade, the extended family became the norm as many people began to embark on second or third marriages or same-sex relationships. The notion of family acquired a wider spectrum, and although sitcoms such as *My Family* or *Outnumbered* adhered to the theme of the heterosexual married couple with more than one child, they coincided in their portrayal of the complexity of family relationships, together with a rejection of the “perfect family” image which proliferated on social media during this era, presenting the audience with a more realistic picture of familial “harmony”, particularly in the case of the semi-improvised *Outnumbered*.

Furthermore, the inclusion of young children in primary sitcom roles reflected the role which children had acquired in British society by this decade. During the 1950s and 60s, the attitude towards children was based on the adage that “they should be seen but not heard”. Children were discouraged from interacting with adults, their opinions were rarely sought, and corporal punishment was the norm both in the home and at school. As the decades passed, these retrograde attitudes diminished, and by the 2000s, societal change meant that in many homes children had become the centre of family life, around which all other family members would pivot, as can be seen to great effect in *Outnumbered*.

A further example of the juxtaposition of classic and innovative can be seen in the

sitcom *Miranda* – which although addressing contemporary issues such as body image and mental health, did so through the age-old entertainment medium of slapstick, and comedic techniques such as breaking the fourth wall, which dates back to the music halls of the 1800s. We have also seen that, by the 2000s, the previously popular sitcom theme of class consciousness and social aspirations, was no longer relevant in contemporary society.

Sitcoms of the 2010s, such as *Mrs Brown's Boys*, *Mum*, or *Citizen Khan* continued to feature dysfunctional families. *Mrs Brown's Boys* used the concept of drag both to innovate and revert to theatrical tradition of centuries past, whilst *Mum* used techniques honed in *The Royle Family* to bring slow-paced realism to the television screen. *Citizen Khan* provided a reflection of multicultural Britain, but unfortunately proved divisive amongst the cultural community which the sitcom represented.

Throughout the sitcoms which we have featured, which we may describe as comprising equal measures of tradition and innovation, one factor which has remained constant is the notion of family. The sitcoms we have examined have explored many different familial scenarios, from the difficult father and son relationship between Albert and Harold Steptoe, to the madness and mayhem of Mrs Brown's large family. However, despite the social change which has been evident in our historical sections, the notion of family loyalty and acceptance has remained unchanged throughout our sitcoms. Even when families disagree, as they frequently do in *Ab Fab*, they remain together, leading us to conclude that it appears that sitcom scriptwriters have reached an unvoiced consensus on the importance of portraying family stability.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the predominant aspects of Britain's socio-cultural and political journey which have come to light during this research project have related to class, gender, and race. Although we have examined many examples of sitcoms which have mirrored Britain's socio-cultural and political progress, we have undoubtedly seen that, although societal progress regarding issues of class and gender can clearly be seen in our chosen sitcoms, the issue of multiculturalism is conspicuous by its absence. Despite the fact that British society is today overtly multicultural, the treatment of race in sitcoms appears to have undergone a completely different journey from that of class and gender. Scriptwriters' attempts at inclusivity in sitcoms initially focused on unacceptable racist humour, before retracting and continuing to ridicule the white middle and upper middle classes, rather than risking causing offence to ethnic minorities. As we have seen in the case of *Citizen Khan*, even when the comedy is created and written by ethnic minority scriptwriters, there appears to be a very fine line between humour and offence. This

assertion leads us to the conundrum of whether sitcoms and political correctness can ever be happy bedfellows. All of the sitcoms which we have featured rely on audiences laughing *at* rather than *with*, which would lead us to conclude that it is practically impossible to please viewers of all races and persuasions. As stated by Laraine Porter, “If, as it is often argued, all comedy needs a victim, then can comedy ever be totally immune from offence and be truly ‘politically correct’? (76).

As the world begins to emerge from the throws of a global pandemic, it remains to be seen how Britain’s socio-cultural and political progress which be reflected in the sitcoms of tomorrow, but we may hope that in the near future, racial inclusivity will become an integral part of the British sitcom and, in the same way as class and gender, will cease to be an issue, allowing us to merely sit back, concentrate on the humour, and enjoy the journey.

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