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The 1920s: Beyond the Roar

In this first episode, historian Kate Williams looks at the era's tensions and shifting values, revealing social progress and a spirit of innovation coexisting with immense poverty and unrest; then we look at the political landscape of the 1920s and meet the first women in government.

To tie in with the release of the 1921 Census of England and Wales in January 2022, our [20sPeople](#) programme explores and shares stories connecting the people of the 1920s with us in the 2020s. This exciting programme includes our new 1920s-themed exhibition in Kew.

Documents from The National Archives used in this episode: [PRO 30/69/1668](#)

If you're interested in finding out more about records covered in this episode take a look at our research guide to [Census records](#). For help navigating our catalogue you can watch our [top level tips on using Discovery](#).

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Transcript

[Teaser clips, montage from episode interviews]

Mark Dunton: This is On the Record at The National Archives: uncovering the past through stories of everyday people. I'm Mark Dunton.

Jessamy Carlson: And I'm Jessamy Carlson.

Mark and I are both historians at The National Archives in Kew, West London, where we research, look after, and help our audiences better understand the Archives' collections of historical government and public records.

Mark: It's an exciting time for historians of 20th century Britain. This year, the 1921 census returns are finally available to the public, 100 years after they were first counted and boxed up by census enumerators. These records are an absolute treasure trove of information, whether you're asking big picture questions or you're looking for a specific individual.

Jessamy: But the census just captures one moment at the beginning of a decade of great change. In order to interpret what we find in each household return; we have to understand what else was going on in the 1920s. So that's why our staff have been hard at work for months, creating an exhibition, programming, and research tools to help you go "Beyond the Roar."

Mark: Over the next three episodes, we'll be joining in on the fun, taking you on a whirlwind tour through the decade, and introducing you to some of the fascinating people and movements from this heady time.

In this episode, historian Kate Williams explores the contradictions and shifting values of this era; then our 1920s specialist Lisa Berry-Waite introduces us to the political landscape of the 20s and the first few women in government.

Jessamy: But first, we had a quick chat with the Head of Events and Exhibitions, Steve Burgess, who gave us some insight into the ambitious task of fitting an entire decade into one exhibition:

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Mark: So, Steve, I'm sure that we have thousands of records in our collection to choose from. So, just how did you decide what to include and what to leave out?

Steve Burgess: That's a great question. It's a big question. You're exactly right. We have thousands and thousands of records in all sorts of areas, so it was a fairly large undertaking. I suppose, on the one hand, we knew the 1921 Census was coming so we knew we wanted to really celebrate this moment, this incredible document, and it was released in January this year, 2022. So, we wanted to put on an exhibition that essentially contextualised and brought that world. The people, all the people catching in that sense, it's all those names, all those families. What were they living through? What was Britain like for them at that time?

But really what we want the visitors to leave with...we want the visitor to have a really good time; that's ultimately what we're really after. We want them to enjoy themselves and be engaged with the collection and we really want to kind of show the breadth and the depth of our collection. Because archives are incredible places, they're full of all manner of stories, and a lot of them are yet to be discovered; you know, there's 11 million records here and you know, we, we don't know all of them. There's a really exciting opportunity as to what you're going to discover in an archive, particularly archives as old and as large as The National Archives.

Mark: Yeah, that's right it sounds like a tall order, but an amazingly interesting task as well.

Steve: And we've never really curated an exhibition around a time period before, so let's look at the 1920s as a time period. Often exhibitions tend to be curated around events or topics, you know, the Cold War or Shakespeare and so forth.

So, we ended up working through this: How do we curate this? How do we tell a succinct, cohesive story? And we kind of thought, but in the end, a bit like curating a newspaper. So, the newspaper you think there's like your headline news on the front page, then you have your sort politics section, your domestic sections, and so forth. Sports on the back. All that news is curated within a time frame. And that's what keeps it kind of together. It's not like a story from front page to the end.

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We could sort of think about it like history itself. It is happening now, isn't it? Day by day out there at this moment, and the moment that you're living in always feels so muddled and you know, writing the history of now is almost like an impossible task. You don't have the time to distil it, the distance of time and that's kind of - we wanted to kind of manage that with the visitors, so they get that sense that there's all this stuff going on all these events, all these changes, these new ideas, new inventions. Society is changing. We wanted to bring that together in a way that wasn't too muddly for them, but equally, it does all overlap. You know, things are happening everywhere, and I think the gallery kind of touches on that for the first time, which is quite exciting, because it is quite a frenetic period—I think—the 1920s. It's often not as well known. Maybe say the First World War period or the Second World War period. We know those they kind of bookend the 20s, but we've been able to show a lot more, and that's what we called it "Beyond the Roar." We wanted to go beyond I guess maybe the more stereotypical, slightly Great Gatsby style interpretation or view of the 20s, which wasn't really the case for most people.

Mark: That's a great way of describing it, Steve, because I guess in a way with the exhibition, you're giving kind of signposts into this relatively uncharted territory you know for people to explore. Could you just tell us a little bit more about what's in some of the display cases? Any particular considerations that came into play when you were choosing the documents?

Steve: Like I said earlier, when this is all in many ways about the 1921 census, so we do open very quickly with a huge census return kind of poster from the 1920s, advertising at the time, for citizens to get ready to fill in and complete their census forms.

And we really start with this moment because it's kind of the touchstone all the way through the exhibition. Some of my favourite things I've seen in the exhibition that I think we've all become quite fond of: In 1928 with the representation of the people, that was the first time that women could vote equally alongside men, and regardless of property status. And we have the electoral form where—it's such a small change—but we got the new pronouns coming through: "her" and "she" alongside "he" and "him", and it's just a little annotation...little note on a document. In many ways, it's just, you know, it's essentially two words, but we all think that's quite a big moment into this. Someday encapsulate such a big moment of change across the nation, which is. It's just beautiful to see. It's a really exciting and great moment in time.

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Surprisingly, we have some really beautiful artworks in the collections, so another really love—I'm really pleased we got this out—it's a big World War One poster. It's a call for women to go and work in the munitions factories and help out with the war effort. And it's a beautiful kind of would cut colour poster. And again, it's the first time you've managed to get something that big on display, which is again really exciting. It's just I guess it's a beautiful piece of artwork, containing such an important history, sort of story and message. So, we've got tons of wonderful things on show, so I think it's a great exhibition. I'm really quite excited about opening it.

Mark: Fantastic, Steve. I think you know your enthusiasm comes across and you know I think you've sold it to me and I'm sure you've sold it to our listeners. Thank you so much.

Jessamy: Now, as Steve said, there's a lot going on in the 1920s, and it's not all positive. This is a complicated decade. But our next guest will help us better understand these conflicts and how they affected individuals.

Kate Williams is a historian, author, broadcaster and Professor of Modern History at Reading University. Earlier this year, she gave a fascinating talk at The National Archives called "Flappers, flights and freedom: a social history of the 1920s," and now she's back to revisit that topic for the podcast:

Kate Williams: The 20s' is such a fascinating decade because our image of the twenties is one of flappers and excitement and innovation and change. It's the roaring twenties. And yes, there's a degree of that, and certainly, we see a lot of that in America. But also in Britain, really to me the twenties is this double-edged mirror. There is freedom, flappers, there's money, there's young people, people...really carpe diem. And suddenly now that people are moving away from domestic service, they have money in their pockets, and they want to spend it. We do have that surge of new excitement, of people saying, "I have survived the war, I've survived the Spanish Flu, and now I want to seize the joy." But on the other side, there's this great debt, great poverty, the war debt is gigantic. There are 2 million unemployed, there are 2 million widows, women struggling to bring up their families because their husbands died in the war, also in the Spanish flu as well. There's really poverty. Every moment of joy is really stalked by poverty and insecurity.

And we see the real growth of the working man saying, "Well, I fought for you, I gave everything for you, and where's my reward? Why am I still without a safety net? Why if I still lose my job is my

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family going hungry?" We see hunger marches; we see increasing amounts of strikes. So, we're really moving towards the general strike in 1926. Sometimes we like to imagine that it was war and excitement and war and excitement and then suddenly it all popped, and the Wall Street crash came out of nowhere. And that's simply not the case. The conditions that meant that America was hit so hard by the Wall Street crash were always implicit. And it's the same in Britain in the sense that the poverty was there, the debt was there, and the minute the ball burst, there was nothing, there was no safety net. Everyone on the trapeze, everyone on the tightrope, they all fell down.

Jessamy: Are there any specific examples from the 20s– moments or movements–that illustrate these big trends you've covered?

Kate: And in my talk, I show a clip I love from 1927, which is a young girl, Mildred Unger, who's 10. And she dances the Charleston on the wing of an aeroplane in 1927. And there's nothing, I mean it's a health and safety nightmare. There's nothing strapping her in. She's just dancing away on this aeroplane. And that to me summarises all the optimism, the excitement, the vision we have of the twenties of being such a wonderful, thrilling time that someone could go up an aeroplane and dance on an aeroplane and you have the flapper, and you have the freedom, and you have flights. But at the same, the troops from the empire, the empire troops are saying, "Well, why are we going back to colonial rule? We came out and fought for the empire. So where is our answer?" So, you really see a surging of sentiment in countries who are under empire rule demanding independence. These are long standing independence movements. And they really do, I think, gain momentum during the post-war period, certainly, and you see Britain trying to hold onto its empire, having this Empire Fair in which it's basically displaying empire countries, but the writing is on the wall. The empire is–post World War One–is just crumbling and Britain is struggling to accept it.

Jessamy: We'll be coming back to migration and empire in our next episode and discussing that in more depth. But now, let's turn to women in the 1920s, and how their lives might be changing. What can you tell us about that?

Kate: The changes for women are revolutionary during the 1920s. And so much of it comes from the awarding of the vote to women in 1918, the vote to women over 30 with property. So, you see the Sex Discrimination Removal Act coming in 1920, women can now access the legal professions, unemployment benefits are extended to include allowances for wives, husbands and wives can

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inherit property equally. When you look at the 1920s, it almost is bang, bang, bang every year a new act that makes women's lives, that changes women's lives and makes women's lives fairer: divorce is fairer. And in 1928, when all women gain equal voting rights, this is so significant. The 1929 election, it was often called the flapper election, because all the women turned out to vote, and women really did come out and vote. They were determined to do so to use their vote. It's not just the vote, it's the fact that suddenly politicians, parliament and increasing institutions are taking into account how to make life fair for women, and how to make laws that will be attractive for women. And of course, the first ones to come out are sex discrimination, property, unemployment benefits, and divorce. These are really the most important ones. And we see a huge advance in women's lives.

I mean, certainly, when you look at the census, the 1921 Census, the most popular employment for women is domestic service, like it always had been, but this is the end, the great house is crumbling. Taxes, the decimation of the officer class, this is changing the aristocracy. The great house is over. And also, the service that women had given, the war work throughout the war years, working in factories, working in men's roles, it had really given women a taste of freedom, a taste of having their own money. It's quite entertaining really because you see a lot of concern during World War One about women smokers and drinkers, people actually writing into the papers saying, "I can't get to the bar because all these women are around the bar chatting." Women are spending their money and they're not prepared in 1918, even though the law was such that women were supposed to... that was the end of it...the woman employee was supposed to be out of the picture. That really wasn't what happened in terms of because there weren't enough men to take up the jobs. And employers often liked to keep women on, they could pay them less, they saw them as more docile, often having more manual dexterity, this was the stereotype that there was. And so, women were quite popular as workers.

Jessamy: I love that image of women crowding the bar, literally taking space up somewhere that's traditionally been for men. Let's have more of that.

Kate: So, these women, they have money, and they don't want to get married immediately. They have money to spend, and there's a real surge of female consumer goods, of shopping, of the department store, of cinema, of makeup, of fashion, the whole flapper outfit; the transformation of fashion couldn't be more symbolic, could it? Your mother wears a restrictive corset and her hair

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in a big pile and these excessive long skirts. And then you are wearing these short skirts and short hair and a hat and an outfit that you can move in; everything has changed. And women really, I think, are saying also, "We don't necessarily want to get married. We don't want to get married now; we want to enjoy our money." And you do see a real drop in the age of marriage. It's not so popular the idea that as soon as you grow up, it's time to get straight into marriage. And the idea now that we have, that you have your education, then you finish your education, then you have some fun time, then you settle down. That is something we really see as pretty much par for the course now in our modern society. We're often quite surprised when people get married at 18 or 21, we see it as you have your twenties, you establish your career, you enjoy yourself. And this type of trend is very much formed in the 1920s, it's very much part of women's lives that they suddenly don't need to marry straight away. They don't need to marry straight away because they have money of their own. They have independence, they want to enjoy it for a short amount of time.

Jessamy: That's a really interesting link to our lives today.

So, moving on, we've been talking about women with more money to spend, and that leads us to a discussion of wealth and class. You hinted earlier at the changes happening to Britain's class structure in this decade. Can you elaborate on that? Does the same class divide persist? Were things getting better for the working class?

Kate: Going into World War One, the class structure is all-powerful in Britain, but the war does start to decimate it. And the simple fact is that when men are dying when the aristocratic class are dying, those who replace them are those who are not of the aristocratic class. So, you see big changes in the army, and you also see the commercial need for women. You see the commercial need for women so that women of all classes are working in different ways. And there are still quite strict setups, so certainly I wrote about this, that the general fact is that women who are ambulance drivers are often the very upper class of women. Those who are working in the domestic service area, those are the women who are working class. So, there is still very much a hierarchy, but we do see the class system beginning to break down in the 1920s. Most of all, because the working man and the working woman are saying, "But we fought for you. We died for you, we sacrificed millions of other dead. We have given our bodies, we've come home like this, so where is our return?"

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So, there's a lot of fear of the working class. And you see this really reaching the height in the General Strike, in the hunger marches, men and women are demanding change. And even though the elites are resistant, even though the elites wanted to go back to the old days when it was country house parties and the servants were tugging and curtsying and saying, "Yes, ma'am. no, ma'am," it's over.

So really, we start to see the beginning of a new aristocracy. It's not about land and about money, it's about industrial and industrial creation. So of course, there are big industries and CEOs and factories during the Victorian period, but now this is where we see the mass creation, mass consumerism that creates a new generation of rich people, and they're not necessarily the aristocracy. So, we are seeing at this point a great change.

You see the big advance of parties who are speaking directly to the working class. There is this great fear in Britain in the 1920s of communism, that the working man is going to turn to communism. And how do you stop him from doing that? At the same time, even though we are seeing radical change being talked about and being moved forward, there are ways in which society is as oppressive and repressive as it always has been. People of colour are treated with discrimination and exclusion. Gay people, there are still great punishments. And there is actually talk of changing it so lesbianism can also be an act of gross indecency.

So, I see 1920 society as one of great expansion and great excitement in which really for the first time the class system is beginning to break down and you can possibly have a chance at seizing things outside of the class system. But at the same time, it is still an oppressive, repressive society and poverty snakes through and poverty threads through everything. And so, people are still just desperate, and people are still hungry, and people are still deeply malnourished and living in bad slum housing.

[Musical transition]

Mark: It's been great to hear Kate's insights on this turbulent decade.

Next up, we're joined by one of our colleagues for a closer look at politics in the 1920s and how women were making space for themselves in government.

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Lisa Berry-Waite: Yes, so my name is Lisa Berry-Waite and I'm a 1920s records specialist at the National Archives. So, this means that I work with their historic records from the 1920s and helped to interpret them to a range of different audiences.

Jessamy: So, the 1920s is a really interesting and in my view slightly under-studied period of history. We've had a lot of change. It's a very interesting decade for a lot of reasons, so I wondered if you could give us a brief overview of some of those key moments, those key trends in British politics. Moments in time that are significant in this time in history.

Lisa: Yeah, of course. So, the 1920s—like you said—is a really fascinating period as we see a lot of changes happening in British politics at this time. So, I think firstly, the rise of the Labour Party is a really key change here. So, although the Conservatives were in power for much of the 1920s, Labour formed its first government in 1924 under the leadership of the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald. So, happening around the same time of this is the decline of the Liberal Party, as the Labour Party became the main opposition party to the Conservatives. So, this period also witnessed new political ideas and organisations forming as well. So, for instance, the Communist Party of Great Britain and the British Fascists were both founded in the early 1920s.

But also, we see a lot of really important legislation being passed in the 20s too, such as the 1928 representation of the People Act, which is also known as the Equal Franchise Act. So, the 1928 Equal Franchise Act is a really significant piece of legislation. It meant that women could now vote in elections on the same terms as men from the age of 21, and the removal of the property qualification meant that working-class women could also vote for the first time. So, there was a lot of interest as to how the newly enfranchised woman would impact the election.

Jessamy: So, the 1920s is quite an interesting period, as you said, because of these changes in electoral law, and we've also seen the Sex Disqualifications Removals Act in 1919. So, we're starting to see the early female professionals. So, the fields of law, for example, have suddenly opened up to women in a way that they never had before. I wonder if you could talk us through some of the other ways, we're seeing women participating in politics through activism, building on those protests we saw with the suffragettes and in advance of the 1928 Act and how these women move into holding political positions that have traditionally been held exclusively by men.

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Lisa: Yes, so I think it's really important to highlight here women's newfound right to stand for Parliament and become MPs. So, we see 17 women standing in the December 1918 general election, but only one woman won her election contest.

And that is Constance Markiewicz. So, she contested the Dublin Saint Patrick's constituency for Sinn Fein, the Irish Nationalist Party, who wanted to see Ireland become independent from British rule. So along with other Sinn Fein MPs, Markiewicz was not prepared to take the oath of [allegiance] to the British Crown and she refused to take her seat in the House of Commons. But although Markiewicz didn't take her seat, she still proved that women were able to win a parliamentary election.

So, it wasn't long after this that we saw a by-election was called in the constituency of Plymouth Sutton in November 1919, and a woman called Nancy Astor was selected to stand for the Conservative Party. So, the reason that the by-election was held was because the sitting Conservative MP, Waldorf Astor, was elevated to the House of Lords following the death of his father, the first Viscount Astor. So as a result, Nancy Astor was persuaded to stand in his place, acting as a warming-pan whilst Waldorf tried to pronounce his peerage and return to the House of Commons.

Jessamy: So, just to clarify, Nancy Astor was the wife of Waldorf Astor. And she was running for the seat her husband had held until he was elevated to the House of Lords. The plan was for her to hold the seat until her husband could run for Parliament again, at which point she'd step down. But that's not exactly how things turned out.

Lisa: So, Nancy Astor's election campaign is a really interesting campaign, and it was widely reported on in the press and she actually won her election campaign with more votes than her labour and liberal opponents combined. So, she became the first woman MP to take her seat in the House of Commons. And for the first time, a woman was able to directly influence legislation. So, Waldorf Astor's attempt to renounce his peerage was unsuccessful. So, this meant that Nancy Astor went on to win at 7 election contests in total, and she remained an MP for Plymouth Sutton from 1919 to 1945.

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Jessamy: I think Nancy Astor is a very interesting woman. She's quite problematic. She holds some views that we would find quite repellent these days. But she really made an impact in Parliament, didn't she? With legislation and her work around the family, women in work, children, she made some, well, contributed to some remarkable changes that we saw in the run-up to the 1933 children and Young Persons Act. So, it's really interesting to hear a bit more about her.

Lisa: Yeah, definitely.

Jessamy: In this time period we see a lot of women beginning to participate in politics. But there is one woman that we haven't mentioned yet who we're highlighting in our overall 1920s programming, which is Margaret Bondfield, the first cabinet member who was a woman. Could you tell us a bit more about her and what she accomplished in her career?

Lisa: Margaret Bondfield was a Labour politician, and she was also very active in the trade union movement and so she was elected as MP for Northampton in the 1923 general election, and at this time women had only been standing for election for five years. She was also the first working-class woman to be elected to Parliament as well, and before she entered politics she worked as a shop assistant and became really angered by the long hours and poor pay that shop work entailed.

But Bondfield is also a really important historical figure because in 1929 she became Britain's first female cabinet minister when she was appointed Minister of Labour. So, she served in a second Labour government from 1929 to 1931 under the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald. So, as Minister of Labour, Bondfield worked on the unemployment insurance bill which proposed reforms to the benefits system, which passed into law in 1930. So, at this point, employment was on the rise which was only made worse with the Wall Street crash in autumn 1929. So Bondfield's role as Minister of Labour was far from easy.

Jessamy: Ok, so we've talked about Nancy Astor and Constance Markiewicz and Margaret Bondfield. Are there any other women you think we should know about in this period of history who are doing interesting things in places that women simply haven't been represented before?

Lisa: Yeah, so I think one of the women that comes to mind here is Lady Rhondda who was a feminist and businesswoman, and she features in The National Archives exhibition. So, she had a long history of political activism even before the 1920s. So, before the First World War, she had

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been a member of the Women's Social and Political Union, the militant organisation which had campaigned for women suffrage, and in 1920 she decided to set up her own feminist journal called Time and Tide, which covered everything from politics and economics to literature and the arts. So, she also founded the Six Point Group, a women's organisation, which, as the name suggests and focused on six key issues which were legislation on child support, support for widowed mothers. Support for children of unmarried parents equal guardianship equal pay for teachers and equal pay for male and female civil servants, and it was, and it was women's organisations like the Six Point group that continued to pressure the government on women's rights and reminded male politicians that there was a female electorate out there with their own set of concerns.

Mark: Thank you Lisa for that look at women in politics in the 1920s. And thank you, listener, for listening to On the Record, a production of The National Archives at Kew.

There are so many more individuals and stories our audience may want to research further. And the same goes for our conversation with Kate Williams, who gave us so many tantalising historical threads to follow.

Jessamy: If you want to learn more about the 1920s, stay tuned for our next two episodes, where we'll look at public health, empire, fashion, and nightlife one hundred years ago. You can also visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/20s-people to find 1920s themed blog posts, audio and video content, exhibition information, research guides, and lots more besides.

Mark: Our new exhibition, '1920s: Beyond the Roar' will be open to the public until June 11, 2022.

To find out more about The National Archives, follow the link from the episode description in your podcast listening app or visit nationalarchives.gov.uk.

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Jessamy: Thank you to all the experts who contributed to this episode. This episode was written, edited, and produced by Hannah Hethmon for Better Lemon Creative Audio.

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