

Life after war

If ever there was a cause for celebration, it was on 8th May 1945: Victory in Europe Day.

But war had taken its toll. Hundreds of thousands of people had died, a third of homes had been destroyed, and Britain was now in massive debt.

Firstly, the country needed to remobilise, get surviving soldiers back into society, and get Britain working again.

In the 18 months after the war, 4.3 million people returned to their old lives on 'civvy street'.

But a lot had changed in six years. The soldiers themselves, their home towns, and in some cases their feelings for their partners. Readjustment could be difficult.

There were rumbles of change in politics too.

During the war, Labour had promised that if they won the next election, they'd introduce a major programme of reform designed to help working people, based on the recommendations of economist William Beveridge.

The Beveridge Report had identified 'Five Giants': want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness, suggesting that the government should protect citizens from 'cradle to grave'.

These policies were popular, and though Churchill, the leader of the Conservatives, had been a great wartime leader, Labour had a sweeping victory. This marked the beginning of the Welfare state.

Among Labour's priorities was improving education, so they raised the school-leaving age to 15 in 1947.

They also wanted 'Homes for All', and one million houses were built between 1945 and 1951.

Nationalisation was also a key Labour policy, which meant putting control of big companies in the hands of the government, and redirecting profits from private elites to the public purse.

But by far the biggest shift in post-war Britain was the emergence of the NHS.

Bitesize

Before the war, unemployed men and most women and children had to pay to go to the doctor, now the Labour politician Aneurin Bevan wanted to change that.

In 1946 Bevan pushed through the National Health Act, introducing comprehensive free healthcare for all. This went down a storm with most people.

But Labour's post-war reforms weren't popular with everyone. Some felt the welfare state was too interfering, too expensive, and encouraged laziness.

So even though the war had been brutal, the big idea of the Welfare state had inspired a period of growth for Britain.