

# Classroom VIDEO

Teacher's Notes

## Life at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

*Grades: 10 - 12*

*Duration: 31 mins*

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### INTRODUCTION

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the peoples of Western nations could look towards the twentieth century with some confidence and optimism. The nineteenth century had seen some rapid and major changes taking place, particularly in Western Europe and the United States, and these changes had profound effects on the rest of the world. The Industrial Revolution had created a situation in which the major European nations with their technological and military superiority, were able to have some control or influence over a large part of the world. But at the same time there was a growing fear that the security they had known for so long was being threatened by increasing tension on the international scene.

Australia, like Britain, was vastly different at the start of the twentieth century than it is today. In both countries people lived and worked in a society where the government interfered little in economic affairs, and people largely had to provide for themselves. As a result, there were enormous differences in wealth, power and privilege between the better off and poorer members of society. Women as a group also had fewer rights and less status in society.

This video gives an insight into the social changes taking place in the major nations of the world and Australia. It examines features such as technological change and its impact, population growth and urbanization, the class system and unequal distribution of wealth, and the changing role of women.

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### LIVING AND WORKING CONDITIONS

The success of British industry and the economy had created much wealth, but this wealth had not been distributed equally among all sections of the population. It brought many benefits to the rich upper classes and the new middle classes of industrialists, merchants, bankers and professional people. They lived in substantial town or country houses. They had a busy social life and were very concerned about maintaining their social prestige and position.

By contrast, many of the ordinary people living in the towns and rural districts of Britain in the early part of the twentieth century, were experiencing considerable poverty and hardship. The housing conditions for many people were quite appalling. Small houses were crowded together with bad ventilation, poor lighting and unsanitary conditions. Not surprisingly the people living in such conditions often suffered from serious illnesses and disease. Although the Public Health Movement had helped provide clean water and better sanitation in most places, the health record of Britain was still quite unsatisfactory in the early years of the twentieth century and infant mortality rates were high.

Most people tended to remain in the class to which they were born. Of Britain's 46 million people at the turn of the century, the majority was working class. To be an unskilled male or female worker meant a six-day working week, the possibility of long periods of unemployment and low pay. Skilled workers enjoyed a slightly better life as they were paid higher wages. Many of the upper and middle classes had domestic servants who did the cooking and cleaning.

The wealthiest had personal servants who ran their baths, laid out their clothes and helped them dress for dinner.

Many workers turned towards the newly established trade union movement hoping that unions would be able to improve their working conditions and pay.

In 1901 the first Australian census revealed that 30 percent of people lived in capital cities while 21 percent lived on the land. Conditions in Australian cities were not as bad as they were in Britain. Living conditions depended on a person's position in the class structure of Australian society. Working class Australians found themselves in detached or semi-detached housing, often with no sewerage and paying high rents to live close to their workplace. The wealthier class lived in areas of prime real estate, away from the stacks of factories.

For most Australian workers, conditions were still poor at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many of the reforms introduced were often ignored by employers. Despite the success of the Eight Hour Day Movement, most people had to work long hours for little pay. When trade unions began to achieve better conditions, people who joined unions were often dismissed. In 1901, just over 20 percent of all workers were women, most of these unmarried. Many of these women were domestic servants who worked as maids and cooks for rich families.

Food was cooked in wood fired ovens or in some houses the more modern gas stoves. Women attended to household duties and looked after children. Housework was very labour intensive for women, as there were no electric appliances. Clothes were washed using a wood fired copper and a washing board.

Clothes were ironed with flat irons that were heated on the stove. There was no refrigeration and meat and perishables were kept in an ice chest. In these days long before the advent of the supermarket, food had to be purchased almost daily from the corner shops, or from travelling food sellers who were usually in horse-drawn carts.

On average families had three children. Children attended primary school where they were taught basic reading, writing and arithmetic. Most left school at the age of 12 and went to work. Those who could afford to went on to secondary school.

Australian dress and manners remained much the same as Britain. Well-dressed men always wore a suit complete with waistcoat, a stiff high collar, lace-up leather boots and a hat. Women's fashion required a slim waistline, which was often achieved by using a whalebone corset. Women made their own clothes or used a dressmaker. Dressmaking skills were part of a girl's education. Outfits tended to cover the body from neck to knee and large ornate hats with plumes of ostrich feathers were the height of fashion.

### ***Issues and activities***

1. Make a list of some of the labour saving devices used in houses up to about 1920. What items are used to do similar jobs today?
2. Using the internet or the library, research the diseases that killed most people at the turn of the century. How could many of these deaths have been prevented?
3. Imagine you are a government official investigating the living conditions of the lower class in 1910. Prepare a list of six questions you would ask each household.
4. Using footage from the video, describe the style of clothing worn by men, women and children from both the poorer and wealthier classes.
5. What differences can you notice between your school experiences and those that have been presented in the video?
6. Write arguments for and against government intervention in the welfare of its citizens.
7. Debate the topic that *Australia was a working man's paradise by 1910*.

## TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATION

The telephone, invented by Alexander Bell in 1876, spread quickly throughout Western Europe and the USA. The first telephones in Australia were introduced in Sydney in 1880. Until 1914, calls in Sydney were connected manually through an operator, which could be a slow process. Few people in Australia had telephones prior to the war.

Another form of communication was via the radio, also known as the wireless. This was invented by Marconi in 1895. Most radio messages were in Morse Code and telegram boys on bicycles would deliver the messages once they were translated.

Sending letters by post was a major form of communication and became more efficient when mail was transported by air.

The growth of the railway system helped to break down isolation and to make travel easier. The railways provided employment for thousands of workers, not only constructing lines, tunnels and bridges, but also in workshops and on railway stations, and for those providing coal and water along the line. Railway stations also proved to be a good location for advertisements.

By the turn of the century, steamships made clippers obsolete. The steam turbines generated the power for refrigeration machinery. The steamship with its refrigeration facilities, brought prosperity to Australian agriculture, which was able to export to markets abroad. This happened at a time when the population of Britain was increasing and she had to import food.

Transportation in cities improved with the introduction of the electric tram, although these caused some problems for the vast number of horse drawn vehicles and laws had to be introduced to protect the horses.

By modern standards cars in the early 1900s were unreliable and uncomfortable. Cars were too expensive for most people until the Model-T Ford was introduced in 1908. Cars had become so numerous by 1910 that the government introduced licences and vehicle registrations. Foot brakes were also introduced to help stop the car.

Another major development in transportation came about in December 1903, when the Wright brothers made their first powered flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

During the First World War, aircraft made short trips over enemy lines, observing and bombing positions.

In 1914 Australia's first airmail was carried from Melbourne to Sydney.

### ***Issues and activities***

1. Why were there so many horses in cities in Europe and Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century?
2. What problems were created by the growth of automobiles in the early 1900s? How did governments attempt to control the use of motor vehicles?
3. From the video footage, describe the assembly line production method introduced by Ford in 1913.

4. How do the telephones used at the turn of the century vary from those today?

5. What was Morse Code? How was it used to send messages? Why is it no longer practical to use it?

6. Research: By the time of World War I aircraft was more than an experimental toy. What do you think was its value to the countries at war?

7. Discussion: Do you think that increased passenger capacity and the greater speed of aircraft solved the problems of distance between countries?

## LEISURE AND ENTERTAINMENT

Although many of the people were poor, a lively social life and many varied entertainments were available in the towns and cities of Britain. The music hall was a wonderful centre of amusement and entertainment. Large audiences came to see singers, dancers, comedians and other artists. There were also the new cinema palaces where audiences could see silent films and stars such as Charlie Chaplin. The upper class followed a busy social life of hunting, dinner parties, balls and visits to the theatre or opera.

Spectator sports also grew in popularity at the turn of the century, and large crowds attended race meetings, football and cricket games. Many people also took advantage of the cheap railway fares to visit seaside resorts for annual holidays or for day trips.

In the early years of the twentieth century, Australians found many ways to amuse and entertain themselves. As well as sporting events, the circus, dance halls and live theatres were popular. Picnics and day trips by ferry or train were popular family outings. In many homes the centre of family entertainment was the piano. Wealthier families could enjoy recorded music from the gramophone or Edison phonograph.

This period also saw the beginnings of the Australian film industry and the *The Kelly Gang* produced in 1905, is believed to be the first feature film made in the world.

Surfing also became a popular pastime in the early 1900s and in 1902 the regulation was lifted that had made it illegal to swim on beaches in New South Wales between sunrise and sunset. However some beaches were still roped off to segregate males and females. The popularity of surfing led to an increase in the rate of death by drowning and surf lifesaving clubs became established.

### ***Issues and activities***

1. Why do you think the piano was so popular at the turn of the century?
2. For what reasons did people attend dances at the beginning of the twentieth century? Why do people go to dances today?
3. From the video footage, describe what it would be like attending a cinema prior to World War I.
4. Discussion: Entertainment for people at the beginning of the twentieth century was not so different from entertainment today.

5. Research some of the games children played, and some of the activities they took part in, in the early part of the twentieth century.

6. Explain what a day at the beach would involve for people in the early 1900s.

7. Write a newspaper article on either the activities of the Boy Scouts or the Girl Guides in the early 1900s.

### **THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN**

In Britain before the war, women worked in only a small number of occupations. However the needs of the war opened up many new occupations for them. Following the massive *Women's Right to Serve* procession organized by Christabel Pankhurst and the Women's Social and Political Union in London in July 1915, the leaders of the suffragettes called off their campaign, and encouraged their followers to take up war work.

Soon women were occupying positions traditionally filled by men in industry, farming, transport, commerce and the professions. Some also served in special women's service corps, while others joined ambulance and nursing units serving in France and other theatres of war.

The ability of women to undertake the work left by men who went to war astonished some, but earned the admiration of most people. Particular praise went to the workers in dangerous occupations such as the munitions factories.

As women came to play a more vital role in industry and commerce, there was a corresponding change in their fashions and social customs. The prewar skirt that had extended to the ground was now raised to just

below the calf. New types of underwear such as the brassiere also became popular. Many women with good wages and more independence, moved away from home, went out alone and dined out with friends. The war helped remove some of the old social customs and barriers for women.

Changing attitudes brought about by the war also led to women over the age of thirty being granted the vote in 1918. Women over the age of twenty-one did not receive the vote until 1928.

Australian women gained the right to vote in federal elections in 1902. However Australian woman played a part in helping the female suffrage movements of Britain and the USA. In 1902 Vida Goldstein was invited to speak in Washington to the American Suffrage Association and Dora Montefiore participated in the organisation of the British Women's Suffrage Movement. In 1911, Margaret Fisher, the wife of the Australian Prime Minister, and Emily McGowan, wife of the New South Wales Premier, joined 40 000 women on a march organized by the London Women's Suffrage Movement.

Australia did not need women to replace men in the paid work force as desperately as Britain. Thus Australian women's main wartime work was in more traditional roles related to nursing, volunteer service and the food, clothing and textile industries. The government refused women roles as members of auxiliary units attached to the armed forces.

### ***Issues and activities***

1. Research the women's movement at the time of the First World War and list the successes and failures they experienced.
2. Discussion: Women's role in war should not be restricted in any way.
3. Write a newspaper article on the role of one woman or a group of women in the war effort. How was this role different to that before the war?
4. Using the video footage, describe the scene at the march organized by the suffragettes in London.
5. List the different types of work performed by women during the First World War.
6. Examine the ways in which the lives of women were affected or changed by the war.

### **THE GREAT WAR AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE**

People looked back on the horrors of the First World War and began to question if the sacrifices made had been worthwhile. Many declared that war should be rejected forever by civilized countries. The war did help however to bring about more contact and understanding between people of different backgrounds, as it gave them the opportunity to meet in the various services or in different fields of war work.

The position of women had been radically affected by the war. The part they had played in the war effort won them a new freedom in work and in social life. While they still had some way to go before they achieved real equality in society, their role had been quite transformed from prewar years.

The war had a very considerable impact on general cultural and educational life. There was a new consciousness of the need for a more highly educated work force. The war had given a boost to science and technology, and the fruits of wartime research, inventions and developments were utilized to make industry more efficient and mechanized. The development of the car and aircraft industry along with air travel had also been greatly accelerated as a result of the war.

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