

# Courtship and Marriage



Many of our informants met their future partners in dance halls after the war. This photograph, taken in 1945 in an unnamed dance hall, shows a couple dancing the new 'jive' version of the jitterbug imported from America, while others dance more traditionally.

I had several soldier boyfriends, and two of them went on to meet on a troopship. As boys will they showed each other a photo of their girl, and, well, both were of me. One was deeply offended and wrote to me breaking it off. Of course it was never on, as he wasn't Jewish – I'd have been marmalised if I'd married out.

First, a little background about marriage in the last century. The number of marriages each year was very stable either side of the two world wars. But against that flat background the rate peaked sharply in 1915, 1919 and 1920, then fell away, and then peaked again in 1939–40, and 1945–48. The birth rate rose markedly in both 1920 and 1947. There was another, flatter but longer-lived marriage peak from 1968–73, as the first baby boomers got married in their early twenties, before the rate gradually fell away to a level now at about half the 1939–40 peak, as society and the law made it easier to live as an unmarried couple, ‘in sin’. The average age of women at marriage was 25 in 1939, dropping to 24 in 1948 and to between 22 and 23 in the 1960s and 1970s, before rising steeply to reach 30 by 2010. The age at which you had your first child was about two years after marriage until the 1980s, when a crossover occurred, and it’s now three years before marriage. Just as had occurred at the end of World War I, if at a far lower level, the rate of divorce in 1947 shot up to four times that of 1945, and was not surpassed until 1971, two years after the landmark Divorce Reform Act.

A girl leaving school in the years during or just after the war, then, might expect to work for about eight years, be married around 24 and be a mother at 26. She’d be likely to marry a man older than her, who had in all probability fought in the war – in fact not that different from her own mother’s experience. Some girls, their independent spirit fostered by living in wartime, were inclined to find the prevailing social and financial restrictions on women irksome.

We girls soon realised that when in the company of men, we were expected to listen to them talking, and say very little ourselves. At dances you had to sit patiently waiting to be asked to dance, which for plainer girls like me was a humiliating experience.

I reflect on how tough life could be for an independent woman – fewer mod cons to lighten the domestic load, few decent career opportunities, and even as late as the 1960s a woman was unable to buy a house, take out a loan, buy a car, or anything on hire-purchase unless ‘guaranteed’ by a man.

With a father more than 50 years older than me, and a half-brother who was 21 when I was born, I felt stuck between the generations.

Those were the days when the facts of life were usually explained imperfectly, too late, or not at all, causing some acute distress. This girl was an exception, and was told without embarrassment when she was very young.

A boy told me the facts of life – a lady has a baby growing inside and when it grows big enough her stomach bursts and the baby comes out. I put him right on that. When I was about four we were buying meat at Dewhursts when I asked: ‘Mum, where do babies come from?’ ‘Just let me finish paying for the meat and I’ll tell you.’ And she did. I knew in advance what to expect of periods, unlike my friend Mary, who thought she had some dreadful disease.