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## The 1920s: Migration and Public Health

In this episode, we continue our whirlwind tour through the 1920s by introducing you to some of the fascinating people and movements of the era. We tell the story of two men trying to make a better life in England. Then, in the aftermath of World War I and a deadly influenza pandemic, we look at efforts to improve public health and morality.

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: [CO 956/537](#) [HO 45/13056](#) [CO 137/744](#) [HLG 47/920](#) [DPP 1/88](#) [MH 55/175](#)

If you're interested in finding out more about records covered in this episode take a look at our research guides to [Immigration and immigrants](#) and [Public health and social policy in the 20th century](#). 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.

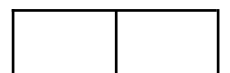
Jessamy Carlson: And I'm Jessamy Carlson.

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: In this episode, we're continuing our whirlwind tour through the 1920s, introducing you to some of the fascinating people and movements of this heady time.

Jessamy: This mini-series is just one of many resources developed alongside our new exhibition: "1920s: Beyond the Roar." The exhibition, blog posts, videos, research guides and more are all here to help you better understand the newly released 1921 census household returns. The 1921 census is a huge set of records that captures a moment in the lives of 38 million individuals spanning all walks of life.

Mark: So, it may be ambitious, but we're trying to cover as much of the 1920s life as we can. Coming up, we've got stories of empire, migration, public health, and the home. But first, Jessamy



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chatted with one of our exhibition team colleagues about the records on display in “Beyond the Roar.”

Hannah Fleming: So, my name is Hannah Fleming and I'm the exhibitions and interpretation manager at The National Archives. And I work within the events and exhibitions team. And what I do is help develop and produce exhibitions basically from concept to imagining what they could be - to sort of creatively develop them, selecting the objects, putting together the design and then project managing the installation.

Jessamy: Hi Hannah, thanks for joining us. We talked in the last episode about the process of choosing which records best represent the many changes and contradictions of the 1920s. But it's not enough to just choose interesting documents and put them on display. We have to interpret them and help our audience know where to look more closely. So, how do you choose what to put on the labels? How do you decide what to say about each item when working within such small word limits?

Hannah: The general rule of thumb is it's best to only try and say one thing about one object because otherwise, you're just trying to impart too much information and you just don't have the words in which to do it if you're only writing 45 to 60 words per object label. So, there's normally one point you want to get across.

And what you wanna do in the object label is to get that point across whatever it is, and also to always draw people's eye and people's attention back to the thing itself. You don't want them just to be looking at the object label. You want them to be looking at the letter or the poster or the photograph or whatever it is. So, you always want their eye to be drawn back to that and to tell

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them something. And I think this is particularly the case with our collection. When so much of it is written, to tell them something that they wouldn't know themselves just by looking at it, if there's anything in the record that poses a question that the record itself doesn't necessarily answer, you want to steer people in the direction of that.

So, an example would be the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921, which we've got in the exhibition, and we've got it open on the signature page. Because of course, another question is what page opening to choose? Um, so we have it open at the signature page because I think it's always good to see handwriting because it just feels like it brings you that much closer, that much more within touching distance of the people who are involved in creating these records. Um, so we have all the signatures on the Anglo-Irish treaty, the British delegation and the Irish delegation. And then one of the signatures, for one of the Irish delegates Eamonn Duggan, it's on a cut-out piece of paper, a little rectangle. So, it looks like it's been glued on. That's a bit weird.

And there's absolutely no explanation of that in the treaty in itself. Now, the reason that that's like that is because Eamonn Duggan, he signed the copy, the Irish copy, at 2:15 in the morning when the treaty was signed, and he then went straight back to Dublin taking that copy with him.

So, when the British representative came around to the rest of the Irish delegates later on that morning to get all of the signatures for the British copy. Well, he'd gone, so rather than try and recall him back from Dublin, they simply remembered, oh, we've got his signature on another document. So, they snipped it out and they glued it onto our copy. So, there are two copies of this treaty in existence, and you'll always know which is the British and which is the Irish because on the British copy, his signature has been cut and pasted.

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Jessamy: Thanks, Hannah, that's great. It's always so exciting to find these little moments of humanity in the records, isn't it?

Now, next up, we spoke to Katherine Howells, a Visual Collections Researcher here at The National Archives and one of the curators on the Beyond the Roar exhibition. Katherine's been working on the section related to migration and empire.

And since I got to do the interviews for episode one, I'll hand over the mic to you now, Mark.

Mark: Great. So, we can't fully understand life in Britain in the 1920s without looking at the larger global context, specifically empire and migration. And how would these two aspects affect the lives of people in Britain and its colonies and its territories in this decade?

Katherine Howells: I think the most important thing to bear in mind about the 1920s was that at the time, Britain was really at the centre of a very large international empire. At its height at the beginning of the 1920s at the end of the First World War, about 400 million people lived within the empire.

And many people from countries in the empire fought in the First World War on Britain's behalf as well, so that was a big impact. Britain was also economically quite dependent on the empire.

Britain's economy was struggling after the First World War, and there was a lot of competition from other countries from the US, from Germany, and Government felt that the empire could be a kind of saviour for Britain, so they did want to encourage patriotic feelings and pride and the empire and encourage trade and empire.

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But I think at the same time–this is why it's kind of a mixed picture–at the same time as these feelings were there, many people were turning against the empire. People were concerned about its size, and you know whether it was manageable to have an empire this size, but also morally, that plenty of people were turning against it morally thinking it was not justified to have an empire like this, and anti-colonial movements were growing, political activism, people fighting for their rights, so this was happening at the same time.

And travel as well was increasing, so travel was becoming a bit cheaper and a bit easier for people, so people were migrating both to Britain from countries in the empire, but also away from Britain. And I think what we also need to think about for those people who did settle in Britain, the attitudes that they encountered towards them from people already in Britain could be– and often were–very negative. And there's lots of examples of that. There's lots of examples of violence against ethnic minority communities and government action, you know, penalising people on grounds of race and this kind of thing. So, it's definitely a very mixed picture in terms of people in terms of how people thought about the empire and the impact it had on people's lives.

Mark: Yes. Thank you. That's a very useful overview, and as you're implying, you know it's a chequered sort of picture.

Now, Katherine, I believe you've selected a few key objects and stories from the exhibition to share with us for this episode.

Katherine: Yes, so the first object, the first record that I'd mentioned would be a very large poster we have in the exhibition called “Highways of Empire.” And this was a poster designed by McDonald Gill. And it was displayed in 1927 and it shows a map of the world with Britain at its very centre and it says, “Buy empire goods from home and overseas.”

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So, this poster was commissioned by the Empire Marketing Board, which was a body that was created in order to try and encourage trade within the Empire and strengthen trade and part of this was by encouraging people in Britain to buy empire goods rather than goods from outside of the empire.

So this, the Empire Marketing Board produced a lot of publicity material to do this, and this included a lot of posters, which make up a very large collection at The National Archives...a quite amazing set of images.

And so, they employed a lot of artists and graphic designers, and you know, very talented people in the graphic design industry, including people like Frank Pick who was well known for working on the London Underground.

But as well as posters, they also held events and they produced leaflets and films and radio. It was quite a multimedia campaign, but this particular poster by McDonald Gill was originally a massive poster. It was called a 48-sheet poster, 20 feet by 10 feet in size. It was one of the first posters that they produced, and it was unveiled on New Year's Day, 1927 on Charing Cross Rd.

And it was pretty well received at the time. People thought it was quite an amazing design, but it's an interesting example because I think it effectively shows how government wanted people to see the empire at this moment. Of course, it shows Britain right in the centre of the world map. It shows the connections between Britain and the Empire countries. And it has lots of little humorous additions, little drawings all over it and one particular one is there because there was a mistake made in the poster when it was first designed - if you look closely at the South Pole you'll see an illustration of some polar bears, and this was a mistake, and they realised it a bit too late. So instead of removing them, they added in little speech bubble, so the polar bears are asking "Why are we here? We should be in the North Pole."

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And so, it is interesting to look closely at, and I think that's why they produced it so large, but it was very popular, and smaller prints were produced and sold. So, it does give an indication that people did see the empire, they did see Britain's role in the world in this way, in the way this poster presents.

Mark: But we also have some records on display that offer a different picture of the empire, one that's rather less rosy and optimistic.

Katherine: There's another really interesting record in the exhibition, which is a letter from somebody called Ali Hamed, who was a boarding housekeeper in South Shields. He was born in Yemen, which was at the time under British rule, and he moved to South Shields in the northeast of England and ran a boarding house where he had many of his own countrymen living there with him. So, it's an interesting story where somebody felt quite responsible for helping out his own countrymen, and at the time one of the main things that was causing problems for them was the Coloured Aliens Seaman Order of 1925, which was very restrictive and required sailors, seamen of colour, to have to register with the police if they couldn't provide documentary proof of a British status. So, this was very restrictive and very difficult for people. It was very difficult for people to prove that they were British, even though they were born in the British Empire, so were considered British.

So, this letter is from Ali Hamed, and he's writing on behalf of his fellow Yemenis who are staying with him to complain about the fact that they are being treated unfairly by this law, and he's trying to help them claim their British nationality, and he did this, he wrote many times to try and help these people these living with.

And in this particular letter, sent in 1927, he's arguing that these people are British, and he says, "once British always British." So, I think it's an interesting example of how communities worked

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together to help one another in the face of these increasing restrictions and a really difficult and complicated and discriminatory registration system that they were dealing with.

Mark: Yeah, they're great examples. Thank you. Now, one of the really interesting 1920s people that we're highlighting in our programming is Claudius Alexander Smart, and last autumn we worked with Tamasha Theatre Company to create an audio drama about him and we're going to play a clip from that in a minute to wrap up this interview. But before we do, can you tell us briefly who Claudius was and what we can learn from his story?

Katherine: Yeah, so Claudius Smart was an engineer who was born in Jamaica, and he was living in Bootle in Liverpool, and he was married to a white British woman called May and had a young child. But he was struggling to find work in 1921 to the point where he was facing starvation in fact. And this was, you know, partly due to the terrible unemployment that was around at the time. At the time as well, the only way to really get relief for him was to a government scheme that paid for Black and Arab seamen to be repatriated to their countries of birth.

And this meant that he would have to leave his wife and child behind. So, it's a very sad letter. We have the collection from Claudius and he's writing to the colonial office asking that he should be allowed to go and that's explaining that he would send money back to his family and that his wife would be looked after. It's very sad, but it is a story that ends fairly well. He did leave for Jamaica, and we do know that his family did join him in 1926, so they were reunited. But it's a very yeah, it's just a very moving story and demonstrates the huge difficulties that people faced at the time with unemployment and with the lack of support in Britain for people who had settled there.

Mark: Well, thank you so much, Katherine. I've enjoyed talking with you and thank you so much for the insights that you've given us on those themes of empire and migration in the 1920s.

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Mark: Now, let's listen to a few minutes from the radio play. In this scene, Claudius is at home with his family, trying to draft the letter that Katherine just described:

Transcript of Clip:

Music distorts and fades]

[FLASHBACK]

[A baby coos, a woman humming the song and stirring a metal pot on a stove.]

[The radio talks quietly in the background]

MAY: When we get to Jamaica, Claude, can we live in one of them big houses?

CLAUDIUS: We can live wheresoever you want, my love.

[Claudius narrating the memory:] I was sitting at the table trying fe write a letter but with May at the stove I couldn't stop but look 'pun her.

MAY: [Playful] Focus, Claude. Focus!

CLAUDIUS: [writing] "To... my... most... dearest".

[Pen crossing out. Sucks his teeth] [Sighs]

"To my most... dearest and... excellent."

[Sucks teeth, crosses out, sighs]

"To my dearest and... humblest... excellency. It is with... humble... abode, that... I Claudius"

[Crosses out]

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MAY: Oh, for heaven's sake, Claude. Just write the thing. Ask Churchill for the money!

CLAUDIUS: [writing] which... concerns... my... current... circumstance."

[paper scrunching, being balled up and bouncing off a bin]

MAY: Why are you doing that? Don't throw it away.

CLAUDIUS: It no feel right.

MAY: What doesn't?

CLAUDIUS: Begging.

MAY: It's your right. [Footsteps]

MAY: It says here.

[Footsteps and paper rustling]

'Coloured men can ask for repatriation to be sent back home, can write to the Colonial Office and ask for money for repatriation for them and their families.' Well, that's us, isn't it? That's our right, Claude, from Mr Churchill.

[Sigh] Start again.

[Paper rustle]

Write it. Go on. Let them know why it's so important.

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Jessamy: If you'd like to listen to that entire radio play from Tamasha Theatre Company, it's titled "A Stranger in a Strange Place," and you can find it on our YouTube Channel, where it is part of our 20s People playlist.

For more stories about empire and migration, check out our previous mini-series on this podcast, where we go into a lot more detail on the topic.

Now, let's turn our attention to home and health.

Laura Robson-Mainwaring: I'm Laura Robson-Mainwaring. I work as the Modern Health Records Specialist, which involves researching the records we hold relating to health in the 20th century and providing advice to people about how best to search these. As one of the curators, my research for the 1920s exhibition Beyond the Roar has focused on health in the 1920s, including health education and policy and emerging ideas around society, morality and public health provision.

Mark: Laura, as Britain rings in a new decade in 1920, it's been less than a year since the third wave of deadly influenza hit Britain. And as you pointed out in our "Public Health Crises" episode last year, this pandemic led to many advances in public health. So, what are the big trends and key events in public health in the 1920s?

Laura: So yeah, the flu cast a really long shadow, particularly as around a quarter of a million people had lost their lives in Britain alone. The pandemic tailed off in 1919 and then the nation saw the return of the seasonal flu throughout the 20s, so it's likely lots of people would have been fearful of more waves.

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The First World War, however, can be seen to have cast an even greater shadow on the health of the nation. So, following the war over 1,000,000 ex-service personnel had to come to terms with injuries and disabilities caused by trench warfare, including the likes of “shell shock.”

So, in the exhibition, we feature an advertisement for a hearing aid, and it particularly recommended its products to the counter “gun deafness.” And then also during the war, we see the instruction of temporary wartime health legislation, so this includes the Venereal Diseases Act. So, this required each Council to set up facilities and treatment for venereal diseases, and that's defined as syphilis, gonorrhoea, and chancre, so that's essentially genital sores.

And then following the war, local authorities continued to provide these services and that includes things such as providing disinfectants and providing sheaths. And they also produced leaflets about where to go for these services. But in this period, there was a general fear that sexual promiscuity was rising, so we've got records that show the state were quite wary of producing too much literature about the situation. They didn't want to be seen to be encouraging sexual activity by providing ways to combat venereal disease, so I think, yeah, the records show they're quite torn.

And in the exhibition, we feature a pamphlet on venereal diseases that was aimed at demobilised soldiers. The men urged not to marry until they were cured. And this was because venereal disease—in particular the likes of syphilis—could cause miscarriages, stillbirths, and infertility, and also blindness, mental health issues. And it had a really high death rate.

In the 1920s, emerging health services were not just related to demobilised soldiers, so we also see the expansion of local authority health services, such as maternity and child welfare centres. So, this campaign to improve mother and child welfare began in earnest after the Boer War at the turn of the century. And this is when the population is poor health was exposed due to low levels

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of soldier recruitment. So, this led to a series of social reforms in the early 20th century, such as the provision of school meals and better working environments.

And yeah, and in the 20s because they see the rise of institutional provision for tuberculosis. So, this is quite a significant aspect of public health in the period. TB is claiming around 75,000 lives per year. But yeah, there's also, you know many diseases floating around in this period, many of which could be very serious. There was limited treatment options in an era before antibiotics, and so we've got things such as scarlet fever, diphtheria, smallpox, typhoid fever. You know, these are all quite rife.

But yeah, so really in the 1920s we're still kind of really just seeing the state extending provision of services or most closely connected with fears about national fitness and efficiency.

Mark: Yes. So, there's a big range of serious illnesses and various initiatives. How far, would you say, did the government's public health initiatives extend into the actual home in this decade? And how can we use our public health records to gain insights into the lives of everyday 20s people?

Laura: So yeah, at this time the government department that dealt with medical and sort of public health functions was the Ministry of Health, so this had been established in 1919. You know, just before the decade. It also coordinated and supervised local health services and England and Wales. And then we also see the UK's first Health Minister being appointed, he was called Christopher Addison.

At the time, social questions of the day we're concerned with producing a strong housing nation, and the state was focused on poverty and housing due to fears of urban degeneration and also the physical deterioration of the population. It was a grand fear that they had, so good sanitation

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as well help to prevent the spread of infectious diseases, particularly diseases like typhoid which was spread by contaminated food and water.

So, one of the first tasks of the Ministry related to the provision of housing and the clearance of slums. The Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, promised that returning soldiers would have homes fit for heroes when they returned from the war, and in the 1920s we see the state began a series of state-aided housing programs, including the creation of new housing estates.

So, some of our records give us insights into how this impacted the daily lives of the public. So, we hold a letter from a man called Arthur Freethy, who owned a tobacconist shop in Somers Town in northwest London. And in 1925 this was an area due for demolition as part of the effort in a state slum clearance program. So, some people living in the area objected to the loss of their homes. You know, it could also impact their livelihoods because Aurthur Freethy, he had already lost one business in the First World War. He wrote to the Ministry of Health stating, quote, “A man cannot work up two businesses and lose them both.” Unfortunately for Freethy, the estate was eventually built up, but no more positively it no doubt did improve the lives of those that lived there. From the 1939 register, we know that Freethy’s two sons ended up living in the estate.

Mark: Ok so, moving on, Laura, you referenced health pamphlets aimed at demobilised soldiers...were any of these directed at the general population as well?

Laura: Yeah, in this period local authorities had the responsibility for health education and so this really meant the quality of this information depended on the enthusiasm of local organisations and also the appointed medical officers for that area.

So, in our Ministry of Health Records, we have files from the Leicestershire Health Insurance Committee which was a locally based organisation, and they seemed particularly enthusiastic

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about offering health advice. They even printed their own health magazine. So, in the exhibition, we feature some of the flyers they printed with health advice. They promoted things like personal cleanliness, moderation, the importance of keeping fit, and having good ventilation in the home. So, in Leicester people would have received these flyers delivered through the door. But yeah, the advice is fairly innocuous. It's quite trivial and you know includes things like "Keep smiling and let sunlight into your rooms," and I think it's quite interesting that the files show that the state discussed whether even this was too much to be sending out to people, like it was too direct.

So yeah, in this period health education was really in its primitive stages. You know it's a time where the state starts to get more involved, particularly, you know local authorities are writing into this newly created ministry asking for advice, so then in some of 1928, we do see the creation of the Central Council for Health Education. But really like the big health campaigns that we would be familiar with today, these wouldn't start until later in the century.

Mark: Now there are so many intriguing items Laura in the exhibition related to health and the domestic lives of the public. Could you share with us some of the ones you find the most interesting and what they tell us about life in the 1920s?

Laura: So yeah, what I think is really interesting in this period is that the state we're greatly concerned with public morality, and they're bringing in lots of regulation that's affected many domestic and leisure pleasures. And so, gambling was one. This was a particular concern because it involved the working classes and this gained sudden popularity in the 20s. Gambling by the working classes was of particular concern that we see the sudden popularity over the new sport of greyhound racing, and we also see the likes of football pools.

So yeah, debates about the morality of betting became heated in our records. We have a letter from a religious group who wrote to the Home Office about the dangers of the working classes

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spending their money on gambling, and they asserted that it was quote “one of the most serious moral and spiritual perils affecting our generation.” And so, you know, quite strong feelings behind this.

And another concern for the state was controlling content in films and books that would that was deemed too sexually explicit. So, the exhibition features an article which was printed in the Sunday Express criticising Radcliffe Hall’s 1928 novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, and they criticised it for its sympathetic portrayal of lesbians. The article noted that the book was, quote, “A contamination and corruption of English fiction,” and so these you know, these types of strong reactions led to the novel going into it, and obscenity trial, and it culminated in an order by the state for copies to be destroyed.

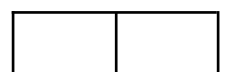
But censorship actually worked in favour of the book. You know, it publicised it more widely, and it also brought the topic of lesbianism—which was, you know, taboo at the time—it brought it into public discussion.

I think the way that the government is trying to censor material, shows us a society torn between wanting to be freer from proprietor constraints. Again, more enduring moralistic and religious attitudes about how people should conduct themselves.

Mark: Well, thank you so much Laura for sharing those insights with us about aspects of health and home in the 1920s. I think they'll be of great interest to our listeners. Thank you.

Jessamy: Thank you for listening to *On the Record*, a production of The National Archives at Kew.

If you want to learn more about public health in British history, scroll back through our previous episodes and check out “Public Health Crises,” where Laura goes into more depth on the 1918 Influenza pandemic, amongst other stories.



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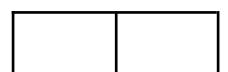
If you want to learn more about the 1920s, stay tuned for our next episode, featuring a special guest: fashion historian Amber Butchart. You can also visit [nationalarchives.gov.uk/20s-people](https://nationalarchives.gov.uk/20s-people) to find 1920s themed blog posts, audio and video content, exhibition information, research guides, and more.

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](https://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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