

6 The twentieth century, 1901–1939

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Taking us from the steam age to the nuclear age, the first forty years of the twentieth century saw both the consolidation of a century-and-a-half's industrial growth and development, and a decisive transition towards the now-familiar modernity of our own technologically advanced, mass-democratic and mass-consumerist society. Despite evident continuities from the late Victorian period up to the First World War, the cumulative effect of the profound changes wrought by industrialisation throughout the nineteenth century gave the twentieth century a wholly new temper and texture almost from the start. Britain was now irreversibly an urban, and increasingly a suburban, nation. The democratic and educational reforms of the late 1800s gave impetus to more radical demands for reform in the 1900s, as did the continuing rise of organised labour and of socialism and feminism. Most dramatically, perhaps, a whole raft of scientific and technological advances had led to striking material expressions of a new age in the form of the motor car, cinema, wireless telegraphy, the aeroplane and electric power. This was 'the seething and teeming of the pre-war period, its immense ferment and its restless fertility' (R. C. K. Ensor, qtd in Johnson (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 76 [Bi]).

Sadly, it was the devastatingly *destructive* power of the new machine age that was demonstrated in the 'Great War', the cataclysmic event which cuts this period in two, and which cut down the male youth of almost a complete generation. Suddenly, the Edwardian age (let alone the Victorian) became another world, and it is all too easy to read Ensor's final word above as 'futility' – the title also of a famous war poem by Wilfred Owen. The 'roaring twenties' and the 'hungry thirties' – the boom and bust of the jazz age and the great depression – have their own complex histories, but the shadow of the war hung heavily over them as it merged imperceptibly into the dark night of a second, even more devastating, war.