

# The History and Development of the English Class System

Hiroko Tomida

## Introduction

I lived in England for twenty years, first completing my M.Phil. and Ph.D. degrees and then working for Sheffield and Edinburgh Universities as a lecturer. During my stay there I experienced and observed class differences. As the class system no longer exists in Japan and most Japanese people believe that they belong to the middle class, I found it very difficult at first to grasp the English class system. However, I came to realise that the issue of class is one of the most common conversational topics for English people. They could easily spend days discussing which class they and their ancestors belong to. Without understanding the class system, it would be impossible to comprehend fully English history and many other subjects related to English literature and culture.

Indeed much historical and sociological research has been conducted on the English class system, and many scholarly books have been published by not only eminent sociologists such as A.H. Halsey but also highly regarded historians like David Cannadine.<sup>1</sup> Apart from academic articles and books, countless newspaper articles on the English class system have appeared. The BBC and other English television companies have produced numerous programmes on class. Through these, much information about the recent changes on the topic has become available. As a result of this, British people's awareness of the topic has been raised. I also conducted a questionnaire with questions related to people's ideas and awareness of the English class system, collected one hundred samples and analysed the data,

hoping to find out about the most up-to-date information. Moreover I used oral history and conducted in-depth interviews with 30 people from a wide range of age groups and social and educational backgrounds.

The article explores how and when the English class system was started and its development over the years mainly focusing on the post-war period. The article will examine the major characteristics of each class and point out the differences and similarities between classes.

### **The Origin of the English Class System and its Development**

In the medieval period a feudal system based on military organisation and landownership existed. Many historians argue that the English class system grew out of the feudal system. The definition of a class is a division or order of society according to status and economic power. Higher and lower orders were formerly used, and the phrases such as upper, middle and working classes which are commonly used nowadays appear to be of quite modern introduction.

Edward Royle argues that the actual language of 'class' began to be applied to social structures in the second half of the 18th century. The term 'middle class' has been dated from 1766.<sup>2</sup> The expression 'working class' is dated at the earliest from 1789.<sup>3</sup> Until the 18th century, the social structure was more based on 'ranks' and 'orders'. Unlike the aristocracy, middle-class people were a numerically important sector of society, and during the Victorian period they became progressively influential in power.<sup>4</sup> They usually tried to distance themselves from working class life. On the other hand, new industrialists tended to aspire to be landowners in their manner of dress, eating and drinking habits. Marriages were often arranged to gain titles. Social class became a major issue in the 19th century and this lasted well into the 20th century.

### **The Definition and Classification of Class**

How can we define a person's class in England? Social class is based on a variety of criteria such as access to economic power, the level of economic reward, the values, expectations, beliefs and experiences of a social group. There are many other indicators to determine one's class. Different classes choose to use different words for the same ideas, and have different accents, occupations, educational, family and religious backgrounds, political ideas, leisure, manners and life styles influencing housing, clothes and diet.

How many classes are there in England? Although there are several classifications, the most orthodox and widely recognised one is to divide people into three main social classes which are the upper, the middle and the working classes. The main access to life opportunities is through occupation, and this has become a most important method of dividing people into class groupings although occupation is only one of the measures. When examining occupations more closely, the middle class is often further divided into 3 more classes, which are upper-middle, comprising such occupations as lawyers, medical doctors and top managers, middle-middle including, for example, intermediate occupations like bankers and company employees, and lower-middle incorporating such jobs as clerks, secretaries and some owners of shops.<sup>5</sup> The working class can also be further divided into 3 categories, which are skilled occupations such as builders and plumbers, partly skilled occupations such as fishermen and waiters, and relatively unskilled occupations such as farm labourers and cleaners.

### **Social Mobility**

Social mobility in England has always been possible although it is more common for people born into one particular class especially in the upper class to remain there all their lives.<sup>6</sup> Marriage, money or service to the community allowed many people from the working and middle classes to enter the upper class.

Dramatic social mobility is, however, achievable in England. In the fields of

industry and business, there are people who have made their own way to success from very humble backgrounds. We can see similar examples of such mobility in other areas of English life. In the realm of politics, Margaret Thatcher, Alan Milburn and Alan Johnson are good examples of crossing the class divide.<sup>7</sup> In the world of music Paul McCartney is an example of great social mobility.<sup>8</sup>

Crossing the class divide has become much more common in England today than in the past. The increase in educational opportunities, and great economic and industrial developments have contributed to this. The major route to social mobility in England, however, is education. Better education can lead to higher qualifications, which in turn, can provide access to an occupation higher up the social scale than that of one's parents.

It is far more common for people to move up the social ladder, but occasionally one finds an example of someone who has moved in the opposite direction.<sup>9</sup> Social mobility in England exists in both directions and throughout the course of one's life one can find oneself shifting between different classes.

## **Language**

Accents are a most measurable social indicator to determine a person's class. Different regions still have different accents. Traditionally, working-class people speak English with regional accents. Middle-class people often speak 'RP' (Received Pronunciation) the standard form of British pronunciation, but nowadays many middle-class people speak with regional accents, too. Upper-class people traditionally have a rather clipped accent which can sound posh, snobbish, exaggerated, aloof and strangled. A significant indicator of this type of accent is the full 'O' sound.

Up until the 1980s having a good accent was considered important. As most people felt that one's working-class or regional accent was a social disadvantage, people with these accents tried to lose their accents and had elocution lessons to

speaking RP to improve their employment prospects.<sup>10</sup> Eliza Doolittle, the heroine of a play *Pygmalion*, set in Edwardian London, is a good example. Eliza, a common working-class flower-seller with a strong unattractive Cockney accent, needs to speak RP to become a shop assistant in a flower shop. After having intensive elocution lessons with Professor Henry Higgins, an expert on linguistics and phonetics, she is able to speak perfectly polished RP and also acquires good manners and etiquette, which transforms her into a refined lady.

Nowadays the lack of a 'respectable' accent is no longer a social disadvantage. Many public figures who have enjoyed the privilege of a public-school education and who spoke with RP, have had voice training to convert their accent into a more regular, classless form. Both Tony Blair and David Cameron have received such training in order to raise their appeal amongst the public. In spite of this, however, an upper-class accent continues to be an advantage on the whole in certain professions, for example, in the fields of law, university teaching and the diplomatic service.

Apart from accent, another clear indicator of a person's class is his/her use of language, which has come to be known as 'U' and non-'U' language. Alan Ross, a philologist and a professor of Birmingham University, in his article entitled 'Linguistic class-indicators in present-day English' published in 1954, stated that the best way to tell the upper class person is by his/her way of speaking, especially his/her use of language which solely distinguished the upper-class people.<sup>11</sup> For example, upper-class people use words such as lavatory, napkins, pudding, sofa and looking glass, while non-upper-class people use toilet, serviettes, sweet, settee and mirror.<sup>12</sup>

The class difference between the middle and the upper classes in terms of his/her use of language is still alive in Britain in the 21st century. For example, Carole Middleton, the mother of the Duchess of Cambridge (formerly known as Kate Middleton), was a former airline stewardess, and she has been described as 'common'

and criticised for lacking class, manners and etiquette, in particular, her use of non-U words such as 'toilet'.<sup>13</sup> This criticism, however, pales into insignificance given that Carole Middleton could one day be the mother-in-law of the King of England.

### **Education**

Education is also an important indicator to determine one's class. Upper and upper-middle class people have for the most part received a privileged education at public schools.<sup>14</sup> As they achieve higher examination results, many of them get places at prestigious universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. Their university education usually leads to well-paid, highly respected professional occupations.

Education is also the major avenue to social mobility for people from other classes leading to occupations higher up the social scale than that of one's parents. Generally speaking middle-class children do far better than working-class children at state schools. However, it is indeed possible for a clever working-class child to do well at school, go on to university and have an excellent career, as seen in the case of Malcolm Goyn, one of my interviewees.<sup>15</sup> Malcolm came from a working-class coalmining family background in Newcastle, and none of his family members and old school friends in Newcastle went to university. On account of his exceptional academic ability, he gained a scholarship to go to Cambridge and was awarded a Ph.D. degree there. He then pursued his academic career and successfully became a professor at Sunderland University. The reality of life in Britain today is such that working-class children will be less likely to go to university in the future. This is due to the economic slump in 2008 and huge financial cuts now being made to universities by the coalition government led by David Cameron.

### **Newspapers and Media**

The type of newspaper which one reads is also indicative of class since British

newspapers are closely related to their readers' educational backgrounds and interests. Generally speaking many readers of 'quality newspapers' such as *The Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Independent* are aristocrats and professionals.<sup>16</sup> Lower-middle class people, who have not been educated at public schools and universities, are the main readers of 'popular newspapers' such as *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Express*. Working-class people tend to read 'tabloid newspapers' such as *The Sun* and *The Daily Mirror*. Quality newspapers greatly differ from tabloids in terms of their content, the type of coverage of events they offer, their photographs and their choice of vocabulary. English people tend to choose a newspaper which corresponds with their personal and professional environment and their political tendencies.

English television programmes continue to portray the lives of different classes and frequently cover class distinctions. Long-lasting popular soap operas such as 'Eastenders' and 'Coronation Street' describe the lives of working-class and some middle-class people in the East End of London and Manchester. 'Only Fools and Horses', a comedy programme, depicts the lives of Cockney market-traders, Del and his younger brother Rodney, living in a council flat. 'The Good Life' illustrates middle-class lifestyles. Television programmes depicting the upper class are not contemporary, but are usually period dramas such as the dramatisation of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*.

Class distinctions are found in dramas such as 'To the Manor Born', comedy programmes such as 'Keeping up Appearances' and 'The Vicar of Dibley', and some sketches of 'Little Britain'. These programmes have high audience ratings, and have lasted for a long time, being constant reminders of the English class system. And yet it is probably true to say that the type of programme that one watches does not really define one's class: very upper-class people might watch 'Eastenders', and working-class people might watch 'To the Manor Born'.

## Clothes

Up until about 1970 it was possible to recognise a person's class by his/her clothes, manners and appearance. Physical details alone could indicate one's health, diet and the type of work one had done. This picture taken from a comedy series called *The Frost Report* in the 1960s was a sketch entitled 'I know my place' to make fun of the English class system.<sup>17</sup> The tallest man is wearing a bowler hat, a tailor-made black jacket, revealing a crisply-ironed silk handkerchief, pinstriped trousers, a nicely ironed white shirt, a black tie and he is holding a long black umbrella. He is from the upper class. As shown by this man, upper-class people are usually tall and slim and look healthy because of their good diet. They look respectable, confident and almost smug. The man in the middle represents the middle class. He is wearing a ready-made suit, a white shirt, a tie and an ordinary pork-pie hat without any other accessories. The shortest rather plump man is wearing a flat cloth cap and a slightly scruffy-looking raincoat presumably to cover up his messy working clothes or overalls. He symbolises the working class. Instead of a tie, he wears a woolly scarf. He does not look at ease and lacks confidence. Because of their poor diet comprising many carbohydrates such as potatoes and bread, working-class people used to be rather short and plump and looked unhealthy. The three men's following lines are worth quoting.

The tallest man: I look down on him (indicates the man in the middle) because I am upper class.

The man in the middle: I look up to him (the tallest man) because he is upper class; but I look down on him (the smallest man) because he is lower-class. I am middle class.

The shortest man: I know my place. I look up to them both. But I don't look up to him (the man in the middle) as much as I look up to him (the tallest man), because he has got innate breeding.



The tallest man: I have got innate breeding, but I have not got any money. So sometimes I look up to him (the man in the middle).

The man in the middle: I still look up to him (the tallest man) because although I have money, I am vulgar. But I am not as vulgar as him (the shortest man) so I still look down on him (the shortest man).

The shortest man: I know my place. I look up to them both; but while I am poor, I am honest, industrious and trustworthy. Had I the inclination, I could look down on them. But I don't.

The man in the middle: We all know our place, but what do we get out of it?

The tallest man: I get a feeling of superiority over them.

The man in the middle: I get a feeling of inferiority from him (the tallest man), but a feeling of superiority over him (the shortest man).

The shortest man: I get a pain in the back of my neck.<sup>18</sup>

This is a satirical sketch, but was broadly true at least until the 1970s. Their lines reveal how each man from a different class interprets his social position and how he feels about the two men from the other classes. Living and working conditions have greatly improved since World War II, especially from the 1960s onwards. The NHS (National Health Service) was founded, which began to provide British people with free medical treatment. People became able to have a better diet and shorter working hours. As a result, previous stereotypical descriptions of the three classes became no longer so true.

The type of clothes people wore used to be an indicator to determine their classes up until the 1960s.<sup>19</sup> As a wide range of clothes became available at a price within most people's reach, it became difficult to determine class by clothes. Fashion is no longer only for the upper classes and the rich. Young people from all social classes usually spend much money on clothes using their credit cards. In particular working-class young people are more fashion-conscious and tend to follow the

most up-to-date fashions. Working-class young men wear sweat shirts, designer jeans, expensive trainers and peak caps, which they think are trendy. Although some upper-class people may always wear posh clothes, many of them wear jeans and T-shirts as casual wear, apart from special occasions such as weddings, Ascot and balls. Middle-aged and elderly upper-class people care less about the latest fashion, and tend to wear high-quality clothes made of natural material such as wool and cotton, which may last longer. Some well-established high quality clothes retailers are, for example, Burberry, Aquascutum, Daks, Liberty and Jaeger. However, for special occasions upper-class women usually wear very stylish and expensive designer clothes. Most people buy their clothes from major department stores such as John Lewis, Selfridges, Debenhams and Marks and Spencer. In the past sailors and working-class men had tattoos. As they became more and more fashionable among young people, even middle-class men and women have tattoos nowadays.

### **Manners**

An upper or upper-middle class man who has been educated at public school, usually has better manners than a man from other classes. He has been trained to open a door for a lady and let her in a room, to let her get in a lift before him, to pull out a chair for her to sit on, to take off his hat to greet her, to take off his gloves to shake hands with her or to walk on the side of the roadway to protect her from the traffic when he walks with her side by side on the pavement. In the past these civilized manners towards women were shared by men from other classes. However, the women, who participated in the women's liberation in the late 1960s and the 1970s, felt that men's civility towards women was a form of sexual discrimination and were against it.<sup>20</sup> As a result, it has become rarer to see men being civil in public places.

### **Shopping**

A wide range of food has become available to people from all classes. However,

the stores where people shop for food can provide some clues to reveal class. Wealthy upper and upper-middle classes go to expensive shops of long standing such as Harrods, Fortnum and Mason and Jacksons of Piccadilly to purchase high quality goods. On the other hand poor working-class people go to markets, pound shops, and other discount shops searching for special bargains. Supermarkets which people usually go to are generally good indicators of class. As Asda, Morrisons and Tesco's products are all very competitively priced, these stores tend to attract particularly large numbers of working-class shoppers.<sup>21</sup> Stores such as Marks and Spencer and Waitrose cater for shoppers who are more interested in quality than price. Sainsbury's is popular among middle-class shoppers.

### **Housing**

Housing, in particular home ownership, is a good measure of social class, and is related to income and occupation. Up until the 1980s purchasing your own house was very much a middle-class thing, while working-class people rented a council house. However, while the first female prime minister in Britain, Margaret Thatcher was in power, from 1979 to 1990, her government sold many council houses to their tenants and others for low prices, which extended the percentage of home ownership among working-class people. This was line with Conservative ideology which believes that private ownership of property and business is better for society because this promotes a sense of responsibility and greater entrepreneurial attitudes. Easier access to get a mortgage to buy a house from a bank or a building society made it possible for even people with low incomes to buy their own houses.

It is also significant to point out that the area in which one lives, on the whole, also reveals one's class because people in the same social class are usually grouped together in certain areas. As a general rule, house prices for the same type of houses in middle-class areas are more expensive than those in working-class areas. Some wealthy middle-class people nowadays have second homes in Britain or overseas

countries such as Spain, Italy and France.

Many upper-class people still own large country houses, castles and land, but maintaining such houses requires much money and many employees. Therefore some aristocrats who have neither, became obliged to open their stately homes to visitors, charging huge admission fees. Aristocrats who can't afford to pay huge amounts of inheritance tax have to part with their old family homes and land.

### **Leisure**

Another area in which one can see the division between the classes is free time activities. The people belonging to this class have a particular style of life which is very much alive even nowadays. Typical upper-class men's popular leisure activities are shooting game birds such as pheasants, partridges and grouse on their country estates, fishing, hunting, riding and playing polo. They are also members of gentlemen's clubs in London where they have lunch, talk to their friends and see their visitors.<sup>22</sup> Upper-class women enjoy organising different kinds of parties and functions – garden, tea and dinner parties and balls at their stately homes. Young wealthy upper-class women used to prepare to become debutantes until their being presented at court came to an end in 1958.<sup>23</sup> After their debut they started attending fashionable social events. Typical events of the so-called “season” are the Ascot race meeting and the Henley Royal Regatta rowing events.<sup>24</sup> At both of these venues, it is customary for both men and women to dress up in particularly formal and stylish outfits.

Up until the early 20th century working-class people hardly had any leisure time because they had to work for long hours to earn their living. It is only for the last seventy years that working-class people have had similar amounts of leisure time as middle-class people. So, how do they spend their spare time? Their mundane leisure activities are watching television, playing Bingo at Bingo halls and going to a local pub where they have drinks, play darts, snooker and cards, enjoy karaoke and

quiz nights, and watch football games on an enormous television screen. Elderly working-class men also go to working men's clubs to drink and chat with their friends. Other very popular leisure activities are playing and watching sports both on television and at the actual game, which are shared by many middle-class people. There are still some class differences as to which sports people choose to watch and play. Popular working-class people's sports are football and boxing, while among the middle classes, swimming, walking, mountain climbing, sailing, football, rugby, cricket, tennis and golf are popular. Cricket, tennis and golf are also played by the upper classes. The middle classes play a greater number of different sports. As many working-class people own cars nowadays, they visit friends and relatives, drive into the countryside and to the sea by car, in similar weekend activities to people of the middle class. Other favourite pastimes include gardening, and DIY (do-it-yourself, decorating the house, putting in new bathrooms, building cupboards and shelves, and making things for the house) which are also shared by the middle class.

By the beginning of the sixties, the great majority of industrial factories gave their workers two weeks' paid leave.<sup>25</sup> Some working-class people still spend their holidays at one of the traditional coastal resorts such as Skegness, Blackpool, Weston-super-Mare and Mablethorpe where activities such as swimming, sunbathing, riding donkeys and eating sticks of rock and ice cream are very popular.<sup>26</sup> Other working class people with children go to holiday camps such as Butlin's, where a wide range of daily entertainment is available.<sup>27</sup> Before 1960 holidays abroad used to be only for the upper classes. As cheap package holidays became available, a new trend for taking holidays abroad started in the 1960s. Thousands of working-class families now abandoned the old English seaside resorts, and started to go on package holidays abroad. Their popular destinations became Spain, Majorca, Crete and Greek islands where sun, sea and sand were guaranteed. As a result, holiday camps and guest-houses at traditional seaside places struggled to survive.

Middle-class people's favourite overseas destinations are European countries in particular France and Italy. In the past only the wealthy upper-class people could afford the luxury of a winter holiday, but nowadays winter holidays have become popular, and many comfortably-off middle-class people go on skiing holidays in Austria, Germany and Switzerland.<sup>28</sup> Many middle class people also enjoy visiting domestic resort places with beautiful scenery and history such as the Lake District, Scotland and Cornwall, all of which have become more expensive than cheap package overseas holidays.

Other middle-class people's leisure activities are reading, going to see plays, films, operas, ballets, going to concerts, flower shows, antique fairs, and visiting famous historical buildings and sites, which stimulate their intellect. Some people attend evening, weekend and summer courses run by Adult Education Centres, museums and External Studies at universities, which offer a wide range of subjects including modern languages, information technology, history, literature, creative writing, pottery, water colour painting, jewellery-making and sculpture. Students acquire new knowledge, skills and qualifications or upgrade their skills. Some middle-class people join local poetry and reading societies to discuss poetry and novels, and also become members of amateur orchestra, choirs and theatre societies. Retired people go bowling, play chess and bridge. Some people, who did not have an opportunity to go to university, study for a university degree after retirement.<sup>29</sup> Others, who completed their university degrees in their youth, return to university for postgraduate degrees. Middle-class people's leisure activities are more diverse than other classes. The one common denominator for all classes is that now people have the opportunity to take time off from their work and enjoy their leisure activities.

## **Religion**

Despite the significant number of Muslims in Britain, Christianity is still the main religion and the Church of England is the state church. However, there are

many other different Christian groups such as Baptists, Methodists, Quakers, Unitarians, Roman Catholics, Presbyterians and the Salvation Army. The Church of England, a Protestant church, is also called the Anglican Church, founded by Henry VIII, and at its head is the Monarch. It has the largest number of members, and many upper-class people are Anglicans. Catholics, Unitarians, Quakers and Presbyterians could belong to any class. Some Baptists, Methodists, and people belonging to the Salvation Army tend to be lower-class. With the arrival of immigrants from Eastern Europe, the strength of the Roman Catholic Church has increased significantly.

A very small percentage of the total population actually attends church services regularly. Nowadays many people use churches for baptisms, weddings and funerals. The upper-class landed gentry used to have their family pews in their churches, a practice which was slowly abolished in the 19th century.<sup>30</sup> They often used to be buried in the church vault. However, the intramural burial was abolished by the Public Health Act in 1848 because of the bad smell in church.<sup>31</sup> Their elaborate church internal monuments with their family crests continue to survive into the 21st century. In the past, the upper classes used to attend church services regularly to set a good example to the lower classes, but this is no longer true. Regular church attendance has become a more middle-class practice. Wedding ceremonies and receptions chosen by couples provide some clues about their class backgrounds as well. The most obvious way in which this is true is the amount of money spent on them. Upper and wealthy upper-middle class people announce their engagements and forthcoming weddings in national newspapers such as *The Times*. They appear to spend much money on wedding outfits, wedding ceremonies and receptions. A bride and a bridegroom, who have never been married before, usually have a church wedding which is followed by an expensive reception at a hotel, castle or manor house where their guests have a sit-down meal. The scenes of the first two wedding ceremonies and receptions portrayed in the British film 'Four Weddings and a

Funeral' give good accounts of the example of a wedding and reception of a wealthy higher class couple.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, poor working-class couples have either a simple church wedding or registry office wedding, followed by an inexpensive reception at a pub or a church hall. This is usually a buffet party with home-made food prepared by the bride and bridegroom's parents and relatives. A recent development has been the rise in the number of couples who go on holiday to the Caribbean, for example, and get married there.<sup>33</sup> After they return home, they have a big party for their friends and family. It is also significant to note that increasing numbers of people in all classes cohabit with partners and do not marry even after they have children.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have tried to analyse how the idea of class has changed over the years in England and has affected people's lives. Although some sociologists argue that the class system no longer exists in England, almost all of my interviewees and respondents in my questionnaire stated that the class system is still very much alive, and on the whole they had a clear idea of which class they thought they belonged to. However, almost all of them felt that the barriers between classes, especially the gap between the middle and the working classes, are getting narrower, and also that the influence of class is diminishing.

What has caused these changes? After World War II under the Labour government the NHS was founded, which guaranteed free medical treatment for everybody. All children are entitled to receive free compulsory primary and secondary education within the state system. The introduction of new welfare legislation has been successful in improving the conditions of life for all people. Due to the expansion in university places under Tony Blair's New Labour, the availability of grants for university students and the access of student loans, the number of working-class students going to university increased. There is great



concern, however, that the significant increase in university tuition fees will reverse this trend. In the past a university education led to better job opportunities and higher incomes, which resulted in many graduates upgrading themselves to the middle class. Since the global economic crisis of 2008, it has become increasingly difficult for graduates to find employment. In fact many graduates are now employed in 'non-graduate' jobs which could be still defined as white-collar jobs. One could argue that the proportion of white-collar jobs since the end of World War II has continued to grow.

After Britain joined the E.U., many workers from poorer European countries such as Portugal and Italy came to Britain. After the fall of communism in 1989, many Eastern Europeans headed towards Britain hoping to find employment.

Britain has become a thoroughly multicultural country. In London more than 250 different languages are now spoken by people with different cultural, religious, educational and political backgrounds.<sup>34</sup> Leicester will become the first city in England where the population of ethnic people will exceed that of the indigenous white population in 2012.<sup>35</sup> The idea of class was important when the great majority of the population was dominated by the indigenous whites. However, as the ethnic population has grown, class has become less important.

In spite of the initial break-up between upper-class Prince William, the second heir in line to the throne, and his then middle-class girlfriend Kate Middleton in 2007, partly because of their class difference, the couple married at Westminster Abbey on 29 April 2011. Kate's mother, Carole Middleton, was allegedly the main reason for the break-up.<sup>36</sup> She is a descendant of generations of Durham coal miners and a former airline stewardess and was reproached for lacking class, manners and etiquette.<sup>37</sup> The subsequent willingness of the Royal Family, however, to welcome Kate into their midst indicates that such differences no longer matter so much. This acceptance of the couple demonstrates a major step forward for the Royal Family, bringing them more into line with a Britain in which class divisions

can be crossed.

A further example of this can be seen in the marriage between Zara Phillips, the daughter of Princess Anne and a commoner, the English rugby player, Mike Tindall in July 2011.<sup>38</sup> These two examples of a diminishing of the class divide stand in stark contrast to the current situation concerning many issues in Great Britain.

The Cabinet of David Cameron, who went to Eton and Oxford, is dominated by ministers who were educated at top public schools and attended Oxbridge Universities. Many members of the public regard them as being unsuitable and unqualified to make decisions over cuts in public services such as health and education. In order to reduce government debts, public spending in Britain is being drastically cut. As a result of this, one of the areas most affected will be education in the state sector. Inevitably this will lead to an even wider gap between the provision of a state versus a private education. An example of the cut is university tuition fees which will undoubtedly deter many students from poorer backgrounds from entering higher education, thereby creating an increasingly divided society. Britain's professions are becoming less diverse and this can only be seen as a retrograde step in the country's development, particularly in the light of the global economic downturn. One of the many reasons put forward to try to explain the rioting which took place in some English cities during August 2011 is a feeling of frustration among young people at the lack of opportunities and the ever widening social and economic divisions between the haves and the have-nots. Many of the looters belonged to the group of people known as NEETS (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Perhaps this whole terrible episode in Britain's recent history has been a serious wake-up call to the British government. David Cameron has stated that the priority of all government departments should be to create an environment where the imbalances in British society can be redressed.

It is worth noting, however, that the former Labour Cabinet Minister Alan Milburn (coming from a very humble background) had already been appointed

before the riots by the current Conservative-led government to examine ways of eliminating social division in order to improve social mobility. Some attempts are also being made to help students from less privileged backgrounds break through the barriers to such professions as banking and the law. Schemes have been set up whereby students are mentored to enable them to learn techniques needed for presentations and networking. If the advice of one of the founders of such a scheme is to be followed, more companies will copy these examples thus creating fair and equal opportunities. This can only be of benefit to Britain in the future.

### Notes

- 1 A.H. Halsey, *Change in British Society*, 1978, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981; A. H. Halsey, *Trends in British Society since 1900: A Guide to the Changing Social Structure of Britain*, London: Macmillan, 1988; A.H. Halsey, *Origins and Destinations: Family, Class and Education in Modern Britain*, London: Clarendon Press, 1980; David Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- 2 Edward Royle, *Modern Britain: A Social History 1750-1997*, 1987, London: Arnold, 1997, p. 84.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 84. On the origins of the working class, see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London: Vintage, 1966; Michael Savage, *The Remaking of the British Working Class, 1840-1940*, London: Routledge, 1994; Andrew Davies & Steven Fielding (eds), *Workers' Worlds: Cultures and Communities in Manchester and Salford, 1880-1939*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992; George Douglas Howard Cole, *British Working Class Movements: Selected Documents, 1789-1875*, London: Macmillan, 1951.
- 4 On the upper class, see David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995; Douglas Hay & Nicholas Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 18-29. On the middle class, see Simon Gunn & Rachel Bell, *Middle Classes: Their Rise and Sprawl*, London: Phoenix, 2003; Simon Gun, *The Public Culture of the*

- Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority in the English Industrial City, 1840-1914*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000; Colin Bell, *Middle-Class Families*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968; Tim Butler & Mike Savage (eds), *Social Change and the Middle Classes*, London: University College Press, 1995; Leonore Davidoff & Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*, London: Hutchinson, 1987.
- 5 Royle, *Modern Britain*, p. 89; Richard Lawson (ed.), *The Census and Social Structure: An Interpretative Guide to Nineteenth Century Censuses for England and Wales*, London: Cass, 1978.
  - 6 Gerald O'Donnell, *Mastering Sociology*, 1985, London: Palgrave, 2002, p. 127.
  - 7 On Margaret Thatcher, see Margaret Thatcher, *The Path to Power*, London: Harper Collins, 1995; Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, London: Harper Collins, 1993; Hugo Young, *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher*, London: Macmillan, 1991.
  - 8 On Paul McCartney, Ian Peel, *The Unknown Paul McCartney*, London: Reynolds & Hearn, 2002; Paul McCartney, *Paul McCartney: In His Own Words*, London: Omnibus Press, 1976; 'Paul McCartney: When I'm 64', *The Independent*, 17 June, 2006.
  - 9 Personal Interview with Mr Chris Snell, 15 August, 2003, Gloucester.
  - 10 Personal Interview with Mrs Kate Cole, 18 July, 1995, Leicester; Personal Interview with Mrs Sheila Lenten, 29 August, 2009 Leicester.
  - 11 On Alan Ross, see Arnold A. Rogow, 'A short note on U and Non-U in political science', *The Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 4, December, 1960, pp. 1064-1066; Richard Buckle (ed.), *U & Non-U Revisited*, New York: The Viking Press, 1978, pp. 28-48; 'A U and Non-U exchange: In 1956, Alan Ross defined the language that marked a man above or below sta', *The Independent*, 15 July, 2009.
  - 12 See Appendix 1. Nancy Mitford, *The Pursuit of Love*, 1945, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954. On U and Non-U, see Alan S.C. Ross, 'U and Non-U: An essay in sociological linguistics', in Nancy Mitford *et al*, *Noblesse Oblige: An Enquiry into the Identifiable Characteristics of the English Aristocracy*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1956, pp. 11-36; Nancy Mitford, 'The English aristocracy', in Mitford *et*

- al, Noblesse Oblige*, pp. 39-61; Buckle (ed.), *U & Non-U Revisited*, pp. 28-48; Ferdinand Mount, *Mind the Gap: The New Class Divide in Britain*, London: Short Books, 2004, pp. 17-20; Kate Fox, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004, pp. 73-83.
- 13 On Kate Middleton's mother Carole Middleton, see 'The art of etiquette', *The Independent*, 17 April, 2007; Bonnie Malkin, 'Queen invites Kate Middleton's mother to Royal box at Ascot', *The Daily Telegraph*, 18 June, 2008.
  - 14 On public schools, see Geoffrey Walford, *British Public Schools: Policy and Practice*, London: Falmer Press, 1984; Edward Clarence Mack, *Public Schools and British Opinion since 1860: The Relationship between Contemporary Ideas and the Evolution of an English Institution*, London: Greenwood Press, 1971.
  - 15 Personal Interview with Professor Malcolm Goyns, 10 June, 2000, Sheffield.
  - 16 On British newspapers, see Anthony Smith, *The British Press since the War*, London: Wren, 1974; Dennis Griffiths, *The Encyclopedia of the British Press, 1422-1992*, London: Macmillan, 1992.
  - 17 'I know my place' sketch from the 1960s comedy series *The Frost Report*, broadcast in 1966-1967. See Figure 1.
  - 18 Ibid.
  - 19 Personal interview with Mrs Sonia Walker, 8 September, 2008, Leicester.
  - 20 Personal interview with Mrs Gill Pemberton, 10 March, 2008, Leicester.
  - 21 Personal interview with Mrs Helen Mackay, 9 September, 2009, Leicester.
  - 22 Personal interview with Mr Derek Rippengal, 12 September, 2009, Cambridge.
  - 23 On the debutantes, see Fiona MacCarthy, *Last Curtsey: The End of the Debutantes*, London: Faber & Faber, 2006.
  - 24 The 'season' refers to the summer season of fashionable events such as The Chelsea Flower Show, Ascot, Wimbledon and Henry Royal Regatta.
  - 25 Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties*, London: Abacus, 2008, p. 192.
  - 26 Ibid., pp. 193-194; Personal interview with Mrs Alice Beer, 8 August, 2009, Leicester; Personal interview with Mr Terry Burnham, 28 August, 2009, Leicester.
  - 27 Personal interview with Mr Stanley Mills, 10 March, 1998; Sandbrook, *White Heat*:

- A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties*, p. 193.
- 28 Personal interview with Miss Rebecca Wale, 13 September, 2009, London.
- 29 Personal interview with Professor Keith Snell, 9 September, 2009, Leicester.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain*, London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1983, pp. 149-151; Anthony Brundage, *England's "Prussian Minister": Edwin Chadwick and the Politics of Government Growth, 1832-1854*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988, pp. 133-151.
- 32 DVD, 'Four Weddings and A Funeral', 1999.
- 33 Personal interview with Miss Deborah Green, 24 March, 2007, Leicester.
- 34 On immigrants, see Colin Holmes (ed.), *Immigrants and Minorities in British Society*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1978; Colin Holmes, *John Bull's Island: Immigration and British Society, 1871-1971*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988; Colin Holmes, *A Tolerant Country? Immigrants, Refugees and Minorities in Britain*, London: Faber and Faber, 1991; Jonathan Green, *Them: Voices from the Immigrant Community in Contemporary Britain*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1990; Kathy Burrell, *Moving Lives: Narratives of Nation and Migration among Europeans in Post-War Britain*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.
- 35 DVD, Leicester: East Midlands Economic Network, 'Preserving Asian Heritage: An Oral History Project in Leicester', Leicester: East Midlands Economic Network, 2005.
- 36 See 'Royal wedding', *The Telegraph*, 29 April, 2011; 'Royal wedding – as it happened', *The Guardian*, 29 April, 2011.
- 37 On the break-up between Prince William and Kate Middleton, see Sarah Lyall, 'Between the lines of Britain's class warfare', *The New York Times*, 24 April, 2007; Kim Murphy, 'Royal split over mum's faux pas, British class system', *The Seattle Times*, 18 April, 2007; Andrew Alderson, 'Wills and Kate decide to split', *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 April, 2007.
- 38 See 'Zara Phillips weddings – in pictures', *The Guardian*, 30 July, 2011; 'Zara Phillips wedding brings in royals, athletes and celebrities', *The Guardian*, 30 July, 2011; 'Zara Phillips wedding: a relaxed and modern affair', *The Telegraph*, 30 July, 2011.

Figure 1 'I know my place' sketch from the 1960s comedy series *The Frost Report*, 1966-1967.



*A stereotyped representation of the three classes*

## Appendix 1

### A list of U and Non-U words

U Words	Non-U Words
bike or bicycle	cycle
vegetables	greens
ice	ice cream
sick	ill
looking-glass	mirror
false teeth	dentures
mad	mental
jam	preserve
napkin	serviette
lavatory or loo	toilet
rich	wealthy
lunch	dinner (for midday meal)
pudding	sweet
drawing-room	lounge
writing-paper	note-paper
(school) master, mistress	teacher

## Appendix 2

### Questionnaire

Please circle the appropriate answer or write down your answer.

- Which age group do you belong to?  
a. Under 18   b. 19 – 29   c. 30 – 39   d. 40 – 49  
e. 50 – 59   f. 60 – 69   g. 70 – 79   h. over 80
- To which ethnic group do you consider you belong? (Circle more than one if applicable.)  
a. White   b. Black-Caribbean   c. Black-African   d. Black-other  
e. Indian   f. Pakistani   g. Bangladeshi   h. Chinese  
i. None of these (Please specify below)



3. What is your nationality?

- a. British    b. Non-British

If your answer is b, please state your nationality.

Where is the place of your birth?

- a. England    b. Scotland    c. Wales    d. Northern Ireland  
e. Ireland    f. Outside Britain

If your answer is f, please state the country of your birth.

4. Do you think that the class system still exists in Britain?

- a. Yes    b. No

If your answer is a, which class do you think you belong to?

- a. Upper (e.g. aristocracy and people with titles)  
b. Upper-middle (e.g. professionals such as doctors, lawyers, company executives, dentists, accountants and university teachers)  
c. Middle-middle (e.g. bankers, teachers, employees of big companies)  
d. Lower-middle (e.g. clerks, secretaries, owners of small shops)  
e. Working (e.g. manual workers such as coal miners and builders.)

5. Which category do you think you belong to?

- a. Employed    b. Unemployed    c. Retired    d. Student  
e. Housewife    f. Other

If your answer is a, please state your current occupation. If you are unemployed or retired, please state your previous occupation.

6. Which class do you think your parents belong to?

7. Please state the occupations of your parents.

Father:

Mother:

8. If your class is different from your parents' class, please state the reasons.

9. What is your current marital status?

- a. Single/never married    b. Married    c. Separated/divorced  
d. Cohabiting    e. Widowed    f. Other

If married/cohabiting, please state which class your husband/wife/partner belonged to before.

10. Do you have siblings?  
a. Yes b. No  
If your answer is a, please state the class of your siblings? If different from yours, please specify why?
11. Which factors determine one's class in Britain? (Circle as many as you wish.)  
a. education b. grammar, accents and vocabulary  
c. occupation d. family background e. manners  
f. appearance g. finances, salary, saving and property  
h. the type of accommodation (rented, privately owned, semi-detached, detached etc)
12. How would you characterize upper-class people?
13. How would you characterize middle-class people?
14. How would you characterize working-class people?
15. Would you like to change your class if possible?  
a. Yes b. No  
Please state reasons.
16. Is the class system in Britain a useful or disadvantageous one?  
a. useful b. disadvantageous
17. Do you think that the British class system could be abolished?  
a. Yes b. No  
Please state reasons.
18. Do you think that the barriers between classes are getting narrower in Britain?  
a. Yes b. No  
Please state reasons.
19. Do you think that the British class system will exist in the future?  
a. Yes b. No  
Please state reasons.
20. Do you have any comments on the British class system. If so, please state them.

## Select Bibliography

### A. Newspapers

*The Daily Mail*

*The Daily Telegraph*

*The Guardian*

*The Independent*

*The New York Times*

*The Seattle Times*

*The Sunday Mirror*

*The Sunday Telegraph*

*The Sunday Times*

*The Times*

### **B. Books and Articles**

Acton, Harold, *Nancy Mitford: A Memoir*, London: Hamish Mamilton, 1975.

Baker, P. & Eversley, J. (eds), *Multilingual Capital: The Languages of London's School Children and their Relevance to Economic, Social and Educational Policies*, London: Battlebridge, 2000.

Bell, Colin, *Middle-Class Families*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968.

Brundage, Anthony, *England's "Prussian Minister": Edwin Chadwick and the Politics of Government Growth, 1832-1854*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988.

Buckle, Richard (ed.), *U & Non-U Revisited*, New York: The Viking Press, 1978.

Burrell, Kathy, *Moving Lives: Narratives of Nation and Migration among Europeans in Post-War Britain*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006.

Butler, Tim & Savage, Mike (eds), *Social Change and the Middle Classes*, London: University College Press, 1995.

Cannadine, David, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Cannadine, David, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Chesterton, Gilbert K., *George Bernard Shaw*, London: John Lane Head, 1925.

Cole, George Douglas Howard, *British Working Class Movements: Selected Documents, 1789-1875*, London: Macmillan, 1951.

Davidoff, Leonore & Hall, Catherine, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English*

- Middle Class 1780-1850*, London: Hutchinson, 1987.
- Davies, Andrew & Fielding, Steven (eds), *Workers' Worlds: Cultures and Communities in Manchester and Salford, 1880-1939*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992.
- Dervin, Daniel, *Bernard Shaw: A Psychological Study*, London: Associated University Presses, 1975.
- Ervine, John, *Bernard Shaw: His Life, Work and Friends*, London: Constable, 1956.
- Foley, Michael, *John Major, Tony Blair and a Conflict of Leadership: Collision Course*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.
- Fox, Kate, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004.
- Glass, D.V. (ed.), *Social Mobility in Britain*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954.
- Green, Jonathan, *Them: Voices from the Immigrant Community in Contemporary Britain*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1990.
- Griffiths, Dennis, *The Encyclopedia of the British Press, 1422-1992*, London: Macmillan, 1992.
- Gunn, Simon & Bell, Rachel, *Middle Classes: Their Rise and Sprawl*, London: Phoenix, 2003.
- Gunn, Simon, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority in the English Industrial City, 1840-1914*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- Halsey, A.H., *Change in British Society*, 1978, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Halsey, A.H., *Origins and Destinations: Family, Class and Education in Modern Britain*, London: Clarendon Press, 1980.
- Halsey, A.H., *Trends in British Society since 1900: A Guide to the Changing Social Structure of Britain*, London: Macmillan, 1988.
- Hastings, Selena, *Nancy Mitford: A Biography*, London: Hamilton, 1985.
- Hay, Douglas & Rogers, Nicholas, *Eighteenth-Century English Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Hilton, James, *Good-bye Mr Chips*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1934.
- Hollis, Christopher, *Eton: A History*, London: Hollis & Carter, 1960.
- Holmes, Colin, *A Tolerant Country? Immigrants, Refugees and Minorities in Britain*, London: Faber and Faber, 1991.

- Holmes, Colin (ed.), *Immigrants and Minorities in British Society*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1978.
- Holmes, Colin, *John Bull's Island: Immigration and British Society, 1871-1971*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988.
- Hughes, Arthur & Trudgill, Peter, *English Accents and Dialects: An Introduction to Social and Regional Varieties of British English*, London: Edward Arnold, 1979.
- Hughes, Thomas, *Tom Brown's School Days*, London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1906.
- Lawler, Steph, *Identity: Sociological Perspectives*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008.
- Lawson, Richard (ed.), *The Census and Social Structure: An Interpretative Guide to Nineteenth Century Censuses for England and Wales*, London: Cass, 1978.
- MacCarthy, Fiona, *Last Curtsey: The End of the Debutantes*, London: Faber & Faber, 2006.
- Mack, Edward Clarence, *Public Schools and British Opinion since 1860: The Relationship between Contemporary Ideas and the Evolution of an English Institution*, London: Greenwood Press, 1971.
- Major, John, *John Major*, London: Harper Collins, 2000.
- McCartney, Paul, *Paul McCartney: In His Own Words*, London: Omnibus Press, 1976.
- Merriweather, Kate, *Understanding Great Britain through Social Class*, Tokyo: Kinseidō, 1984.
- Mitford, Nancy *et al*, *Noblesse Oblige: An Enquiry into the Identifiable Characteristics of the English Aristocracy*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1956.
- Mitford, Nancy, *The Pursuit of Love*, 1945, Harmondsworth; Penguin Books, 1954.
- Mount, Ferdinand, *Mind the Gap: The New Class Divide in Britain*, London: Short Books, 2004.
- O'Donnell, Gerald, *Mastering Sociology*, 1985, London: Palgrave, 2002.
- Ollard, Richard, *An English Education: A Perspective of Eton*, London: Collins, 1982.
- Peel, Ian, *The Unknown Paul McCartney*, London: Reynolds & Hearn, 2002.
- Roberts, Ken, *Class in Modern Britain*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001.
- Royle, Edward, *Modern Britain: A Social History 1750-1997*, 1987, London: Arnold, 1997.
- Sandbrook, Dominic, *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties*, London: Abacus, 2008.
- Savage, Michael, *The Remaking of the British Working Class, 1840-1940*, London:

- Routledge, 1994.
- Shaw, George Bernard, *Pygmalion*, 1920, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1941.
- Smith, Anthony, *The British Press since the War*, London: Wren, 1974.
- Sugar, Alan, *The Apprentice: How to Get Hired not Fired*, London: BBC Books, 2006.
- Thatcher, Margaret, *The Downing Street Years*, London: Harper Collins, 1993.
- Thatcher, Margaret, *The Path to Power*, London: Harper Collins, 1995.
- Thomas, David, *Alan Sugar: The Amstrad Story*, London: Pan, 1991.
- Thompson, E. P., *The Making of the English Working Class*, London: Vintage, 1966.
- Thompson, Laura, *Nancy Mitford: The Biography*, London: Headline Book, 2004.
- Wakelin, Martyn F., *English Dialects: An Introduction, 1972*, London: The Athlone Press, 1977.
- Walford, Geoffrey, *British Public Schools: Policy and Practice*, London: Falmer Press, 1984.
- Weedon, Chris, *Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004.
- Westergaard, J. & H. Rester, H., *Class in a Capitalist Society: A Study of Contemporary Britain*, London: Heinemann Educational, 1975.
- Wohl, Anthony S., *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain*, London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1983.
- Young, Hugo, *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher*, London: Macmillan, 1991.