Yes, 1957 really was the happiest year ever!

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That's what researchers found — and as a historian argues, our cynical modern age could learn so much from its optimism

All Shook Up: The jive was the dance craze in 1957 — and Elvis had his first UK No 1

by Dominic Sandbrook

WHEN was Britain happiest? Historians have argued about that question for years, but now a team at Warwick University claim to have cracked it. The best year in our modern history, they claim, was 1957.

On the face of it, this might look like an odd choice — 1957 was the year Harold Macmillan became Prime Minister, Paul McCartney first met John Lennon, and astronomer Patrick Moore first appeared on British television.

It was also the year the Queen delivered her first televised Christmas message and Elvis Presley recorded his first British No 1, All Shook Up.

But it was not, by any means, one of modern history's iconic years.

No one has ever written a book celebrating the events and achievements of 1957, as they have with landmark years such as 1914 (the beginning of World War I), 1945 (the end of World War II) or 1989 (the end of the Cold War).

But the Warwick researchers are adamant. After scouring some eight million books published between 1776 and 2009, and counting the use of 'positive words' such as 'peaceful', 'enjoyment' and 'happiness', they claim that all the evidence suggests that 1957 represented the peak, the veritable Everest, of our national well-being.

Having spent the best part of two decades writing about Britain since the Fifties, I might have a few doubts about their research methods, but I can't disagree with their conclusion.

And although self-styled progressives may love to mock the gentle, orderly world of Fifties Britain, I think we could learn a great deal from the days of G-plan furniture, Bakelite radios and Lyons Corner Houses.

To youngsters today, Britain in 1957 must seem like ancient history. This was a land of smoky terraces and neighbourhood pubs, men in greatcoats huddled over their pints of heavy and housewives in headscarves sweeping their steps, a vanishing landscape of pigeon lofts and pools coupons, Muffin The Mule and Hancock's Half Hour.

It wasn't perfect, of course. No society ever is. Britain in the late Fifties had little time for people who were different, for immigrants, gays and lesbians, or for those who just didn't quite fit in. If you walked down some streets in 1957, you could hardly miss the landladies' cards: 'No dogs, no Irish, no coloureds.'

It is too easy, though, to sneer at the supposed failings of our predecessors. Far better, I think, to learn from what they got right — and the truth is that in 1957, Britain got an awful lot right.

Perhaps the most striking thing, given how miserable so many of us are in 2017, is what a cheerful, optimistic people we once were It was only 12 years since the were. It was only 12 years since the end of World War II, and many towns and cities were still scarred by bomb damage.

YET after the years of post-war austerity, the great engine of consumerism had already begun to roar. By 1957, the first 'expresso' bars, as people called them, were starting to appear, while the first skiffle groups were finding an eager audience.

High Street sales of cars, televisions, and household appliances were at record levels: by the end of the decade eight out of every ten working-class families owned a television, and three in ten owned a washing machine; at the beginning virtually no one owned either.

To put it simply, life was getting better at an astonishing rate.

It was only 20 years since Britain had been sunk in the depths of the Great Depression, yet millions of people were now enjoying comforts and pleasures — a new home, a new car, perhaps even a foreign holiday — that would once have been almost unimaginable.

Indeed, to be young in 1957 was heaven. This was a country with full employment, where you could walk out of one job on Monday afternoon and into a better one on Tuesday morning, where wages were high and rising all the time.

No generation in history had enjoyed the financial and personal freedom of the teenagers of 1957.

As one working-class youngster told an interviewer: 'Every week I'd buy at least two or three [music] singles. There were so many well-paid jobs for teenagers connected with the car industry. I'd spend ten pounds every weekend on myself, on clothes, on going out, and, most of all, on music.'

None of this was lost on Harold Macmillan, who positively revelled in the new consumer society. No doubt this explains his famous words in Bedford that July.

'Let's be frank about it,' the Prime Minister told the crowd, 'most of

our people have never had it so good.

'Go around the country, go to the industrial towns, go to the farms, and you will see a state of prosperity such as we have never had in my lifetime — nor indeed ever in the history of this country.'

At the time, of course, people assumed that their new-found prosperity would make them ever happier.

As the late Fifties became the Sixties, they dreamed of ever bigger wage packets, ever flashier cars, ever more elaborate appliances, ever more exotic holidays.

Surely, they told themselves, life in the early 21st Century would be a paradise of pleasure, free from illness, sadness, envy and anxiety.

Well, we know how wrong they were. For the truth is that for all the consumerism and optimism, perhaps the most precious quality that defined Britain in 1957 was a sense of community.

This, more than anything, else, is what distinguished that world from our own: a sense of belonging, of neighbourliness, of a stable, settled, happy society.

This was a socially mobile country, in which bright working-class children could aspire to a place at university, a good job and a steady income.

But it was not a society in thrall to greed and ambition; nor was it a society of rampant individualists, who knew the price of everything and the value of nothing.

This was just as true, by the way, in prosperous suburbs as it was in the stereotypically warm and homogenous streets of the inner cities.

So when researchers visited the booming suburb of Woodford, in what is now North-East London, in 1957, they were struck by the strong sense of community spirit.

People went to church and clubs together. They knew and got on with their neighbours, and felt reassured that their fellow residents shared their culture and their values. 'There's a very friendly spirit,' remarked one housewife, a Mrs Noble. 'I think it's a wonderful community in this part.'

She was talking about Woodford, but she might easily have been talking about Britain.

In some quarters, of course, Fifties Britain gets an unjustly bad press.

Left-wing intellectuals, for example, are often quick to bash the Fifties as stuffy, stagnant and reactionary, and to hold up the supposedly liberated and free-thinking Sixties instead.

THIS has always struck me as utter nonsense. Yes, Fifties Britain was a patriotic, morally conservative country, not without its flaws and prejudices.

But it was also an immensely stable, prosperous and optimistic society, perfectly balanced between progress and continuity, between enthusiasm for change and respect for tradition.

With their memories of war and austerity, most people were too sensible, too seasoned by hardship, to share our obsessions with novelty and celebrity. They knew that true happiness often lies in simplicity and stability, the values that we in 2017 have largely forgotten.

In Woodford in 1957, researchers talked to one woman whose life would probably seem horrifically boring to many young people today.

'At the end of the day,' she remarked, 'I remember all the polishing and cleaning, washing and ironing, that will have to be done all over again, and like many other housewives I wish that my life could be a little more exciting sometimes.

'But when the evening fire glows, when the house becomes a home, then it seems to me that this is perhaps the path to true happiness.'

Are our own lives, with their restless excitements and nagging anxieties, the flood of emails and Twitter alerts, really so much happier than hers? I doubt it.

Indeed, when you watch newsreels and films of the day, and see the simple joy of people sunning themselves on Blackpool beach, waving excitedly out of train windows, chatting affably to their neighbours on the street corner, or throwing their caps aloft at football matches, it is hard not to feel a stab of regret at our lost innocence.

We cannot turn the clock back, of course. The days of Dixon Of Dock Green and pipe smoke in pubs are gone, never to return.

But if we could once again learn the values of simplicity, stability, patriotism and community, then perhaps we, too, could recapture the quiet contentment that characterised so many people's lives in that vanished world of 1957.