Marvin Close

1974

Football In The Seventies

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Life in 1974

'This is a new year. A new beginning.
And things will change'

Taylor Swift

IN JANUARY 1974, and almost as a hangover from the festive season, Slade were still number one in the charts with 'Merry Xmas Everybody', the chorus of which joyfully proclaimed, 'So here it is, merry Christmas, everybody's having fun.' Only they weren't. Britons welcomed in 1974 amid a depressing basket of national problems – strikes, fuel shortages, power cuts, a state of emergency in Northern Ireland, IRA bombings on the mainland and the damaging effects of an oil crisis in the Middle East. To make matters worse, Britain's economy under Conservative prime minister Edward Heath was going down the toilet. In January, the nation alarmingly entered its first official post-war recession; a lot of people were seriously skint and prices were rising. The liberal, freewheeling Swinging Sixties were now but a memory and the population was struggling to make sense of a new, at times unnervingly fast-changing world. People were trying to get used to everything from the rising crime and unemployment rates and the blight of football hooliganism, to the new decimal currency, the introduction

of post codes and bar codes, new telephone area codes – and increasing political instability.

In the early 1970s, most of the country's electricity was produced by coal-burning power stations, and when Britain's miners went on a lengthy national pay strike, Heath's Conservative government were forced to bring in sweeping energy-saving measures. On New Year's Day, the PM introduced a strict three-day working week. Apart from essential services like hospitals and schools, businesses, offices and factories were forced to limit their electricity usage to three consecutive days, heat premises to a maximum of 17°C, and then either close for the rest of the week or work by torch and candlelight. For a while, it was a novelty, but soon it became a complete pain in the arse. As coal reserves dwindled, Britons had to live with regular power cuts too, and in the cold, dank, dark winter weather, shivered beneath overcoats, duvets, blankets and thick woolly football scarves.

To further conserve energy, TV companies were ordered to close down at 10.30pm every day and football clubs were banned from playing floodlit midweek matches. A 50mph speed limit was imposed on all roads and motorways and the cost of petrol rose to 50p a gallon, up 20 per cent from the year before. The strain on the country was huge, the economy collapsing. Convinced that most of the electorate backed his attempts to end the miners' strike, Heath decided to go to the country and called a February general election; he had misjudged. Rather than increase his government's narrow majority, the result was a hung parliament: Harold Wilson's Labour Party gained 301 seats to the Tories' 297. Desperate to hang on to government, Heath tried to come to an agreement with the Liberals and Ulster Unionists, but failed; Wilson returned to power and formed a minority administration.

On 7 March Wilson put an end to the three-day working week and then agreed to a 35 per cent wage rise with the National Union of Miners. In modern terms, this may seem a huge jump in pay, but in truth, miners had not had a raise for a decade and many lived on subsistence wages. Just to underline what a hard and dangerous job being a miner was, four days after the strike ended ten colliers died in a methane gas explosion at Golborne Colliery near Wigan. In October, Labour would call for the year's second general election and secured a clear majority. A victory for Harold Wilson but the truth was, he had inherited a deeply poisoned chalice. Britain was in a right old mess.

Not surprisingly the tough time that the country was experiencing led many to take solace in the comfort of both nostalgia and comedy. Television's big hit of the year was the Edwardian-set drama *Upstairs, Downstairs*, the best-selling book was *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady*, and the pop music charts were awash with early 1960s US high-school doo-wop pastiches from the likes of Showaddywaddy, Mud and the Rubettes. The Swedish pop juggernauts that were ABBA announced themselves to the world by winning the Eurovision Song Contest with three and a bit minutes of musical comfort food, 'Waterloo'. Ear-worm novelty records proliferated with everything from Ray Stevens capitalising on the mid-70s craze for running naked through public spaces, 'The Streak' ; Sylvia's celebration of the increasingly popular Spanish package holiday, 'Y Viva Espana'; to the Wombles' celebration of, well, wombling.

From the jazz age of the 1920s and early 1930s to the dance halls of the Second World War, history shows us that in times of economic problems and strife, music that people could dance to and forget their troubles was generally at its most popular. So it was perhaps no surprise that amid the grim grey realities of 1974 Great Britain, a thrilling new

dance sound would get young Brits on to their feet. The year saw the beginning of the disco explosion, with Barry White, Gloria Gaynor, the Hues Corporation and Disco Tex and His Sex-O-Lettes all charting for the first time. Clubs up and down the country went disco and a joyful, exciting new movement was born. But this all came from the USA – what was new and innovative in British music? Well, not a lot.

Now minus his Spiders From Mars, the chameleon-like David Bowie showed new chops with his album *Diamond Dogs*. A dystopian 'concept' album inspired by Orwell's *1984* and the work of American writer William Burroughs, it contained an absolute banger in 'Rebel Rebel' and was one of the best British albums of the year. Bad Company recorded their self-titled debut album in just two weeks, and powered along by the astonishing blues-rock singing of former Free vocalist Paul Rodgers, its urgency and energy propelled it towards the top of the album charts in both Britain and the USA.

Elsewhere, Genesis continued their descent into over-blown, over-theatrical prog rock with their own concept album, *The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway*. And keeping them company in a year of mediocre rock music album releases were dozens of plodding, noodling British prog rock bands. Financially much further down the musical food chain, dozens of new bands went back to grass roots to form the pub rock scene. The true precursor to British punk music, it was largely concentrated in the small clubs and pubs of London and in 1974, became the petri dish for several future influential performers. Anti-glam and unflashy, pub rock was back-to-basics r'n'b, sometimes with country rock influences, and played on tiny stages in venues like the now legendary Hope and Anchor pub and the Greyhound club. In 1974, bands like Bees Make Honey, Ducks Deluxe, Ace and the Count Bishops played their

socks off live night after night for very little money. Major record labels came sniffing around throughout the year, but virtually all of them concluded that pub rock had little mass-market appeal and passed on the opportunity. Snubbed by the majors and desperate to put out product, the bands signed for small independent labels like Stiff and Chiswick and the pub rock scene staggered on into 1975. But some of those bands contained singers, songwriters and performers who would soon become huge. The 101ers singer and guitarist Joe Strummer formed the Clash; Kilburn and the High Roads polio-stricken, art college teacher frontman Ian Dury would become leader of Ian Dury and the Blockheads; while Flip City's shy young bespectacled Scouse guitarist Declan MacManus morphed into the self-assured swagger of Elvis Costello. Two bands who were initially turned down by the major labels, Dr Feelgood and Eddie and the Hot Rods, went on to become chart regulars.

On the comedy front, 1974 saw the launch of a raft of classic comedy series like *Fawlty Towers*, *Porridge*, *Rising Damp* and *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*. Elsewhere in television the year saw some interesting firsts. BBC2 aired a series of single new dramas in the series *Second City Firsts*, one of which, 'Girl', featured British TV's first lesbian kiss. The BBC also debuted Britain's first fly-on-the-wall documentary series, unassumingly named *The Family*, which followed the warts-and-all daily life of the Wilkins household. It fast became the country's most controversial and talked-about television show. If it had been made today, it would have been named *The Family – Shit Happens*. Nine members of the extended Wilkins family, a dog and a dozen budgies lived cheek-by-jowl over three floors of tiny rooms above a greengrocer's shop in Reading, Berkshire. Mum Margaret worked downstairs as a shop assistant in the greengrocer's, dad Terry was a bus driver and as well as sharing their flat with grown-up children

Marion and Gary, chippy teenage daughter Heather and daydreaming ten-year-old son Christopher, the overcrowded living space was also home to Gary's wife Karen and their baby Scott, plus Marion's fiancé Tom.

Producer Paul Watson said he 'wanted to make a series about the kind of people who never got on to television'. In the end, he and the watching audience got rather more than they had bargained for. Beneath a fug of cigarette smoke – apart from baby Scott, the dog and the budgies, everyone smoked – a riveted nation watched as this 'ordinary' working-class family fought life's problems and one another. At the core of everything, matriarch Margaret battled daily to support and do the best for her kids, their partners and new grandson Scott but it was not an easy fight.

Money and the lack of it was always an issue and Margaret was desperate for Gary and Karen and Marion and Tom to stand on their own two feet, leave the flat and get their own places. Gary, Karen and their baby were on the council housing list and also keen to get their own space; Marion and Tom were a different kettle of fish. Marion worked as a hairdresser and though responsible and much like her mum, Tom knew when he was on to a good thing. He worked occasionally in furniture removals but enjoyed most of the day in the pub. Throughout the 12-episode series he was constantly pressured by Marion and her mum about committing, showing more responsibility and setting a date for their wedding. Fifteen-year-old Heather was becoming a handful. A constant problem at school, she was desperate to leave, get a job and start earning her own money. Ten-year-old son Christopher would become the subject of a revelation that genuinely shocked the watching audience – Margaret admitted to him that Terry wasn't his father but the product of a shocking affair. So far, so soap opera.

Working for 18 hours a day over a three-month period, the film crew were given a front door key to enter the flat any time they liked. As soon as it hit the screen, *The Family* divided the nation. The production team drew praise for portraying real life as lived by millions; others were offended by the bad language and swearing, which was rare on TV in 1974; many had a queasy feeling that this was nothing but an attempt to exploit ordinary people to create TV poverty porn. Predictably, opportunist politicians, moralistic campaigners and certain areas of the press jumped on the bandwagon. Clean-up TV campaigner Mary Whitehouse was characteristically appalled that the family's unmarried daughter was openly living and sleeping with her unmarried boyfriend and called for the series to be banned lest this family be seen as 'a model to imitate'.

Local Reading MP Dr Gerry Vaughan pompously declared, 'It's upset a lot of people. I've had a lot of letters from people who said it gave the town of Reading a bad name – and it's a boring programme.' And that's where he was so wrong. It was utterly absorbing and groundbreaking. Despite all their problems and perfectly normal human weaknesses and foibles, the Wilkins family showed themselves to be resilient and supportive, battling against all the odds to do their best with the poor hand of cards they'd been dealt. If you want to know what ordinary lived life was like for many people in the 70s this extraordinary TV series gets you as near to the truth as you'll find. Fortunately, every single episode from the series is still up there on YouTube. Give it a watch – you won't be disappointed.

Like families all across the country, one major problem the Wilkins family were trying to cope with was the rise in prices. The Middle East oil crisis and Britain's crashing economy sent the cost of basic essentials soaring. A year before, a gallon of petrol had cost 39p; by 1974 this had

risen to 50p. In 1973, a dozen eggs cost 32p; a year later, this had risen to 45p. A large loaf of bread in 73 would put you back 11 and a half pence; a year later, 14 and a half pence. A pint of beer in 1974? Just 18 and a half pence; a year on, 22 and a half pence. All the basic food staples continued to soar in price throughout 1974 and simply putting food on the table had become a struggle. A full-time male manual worker aged 18 and over earned an average of £48.50 a week; tellingly, and it says much about the time, a full-time female manual worker earned just £27 a week, often for doing exactly the same job as their male colleagues. It was an unprecedented post-war cost-of-living crisis; does any of this sound familiar?

The dark horrors of terrorism had well and truly arrived on the British mainland. In 1973, the Provisional IRA had extended its bombing campaign to military and important infrastructure targets inside Britain, to put further pressure on the government to pull out of Northern Ireland. Throughout 1974, the reign of terror grew ever more lethal as they also began to concentrate on civilian targets, particularly in Birmingham and the West Midlands. But why was Britain's second city, with a population of over one million which in 1974 had a largely Catholic Irish community of nearly 100,000, targeted so often? Numerous theories exist; combine them together and we start to approach what may have been the reasons. Birmingham had long been a hugely important transport hub, containing major road, rail and aeroplane routes, able to take people in and out of the city at speed to other parts of the country and abroad. London, as it still remains, is England's best-policed and defended city, so Birmingham was always a softer, albeit an important and strategic, target. And certain well-established hardcore Irish Catholic families in the city offered safe houses and support to Provisional IRA players on the mainland.

Coming into November 1974, there had been 32 separate bomb attacks in the area, hitting factories, department stores, shops and offices. The IRA welcomed the West Midlands into the new year by blowing up part of Birmingham Shopping Centre. In April, a bomb wrecked the foyer of central Birmingham's impressive Rotunda building; 25 minutes later, a second blast destroyed a railway signal box in Navigation Street, knocking out local train services. On 14 July a series of bombs caused £500,000 of damage at the Rotunda (again), a factory in nearby Smethwick, a timber yard in Birmingham's Curzon Street and in an underground passageway in Watson Road, Nechells. Later the same month, five Birmingham cinemas were targeted with incendiary bombs and in October, a bomb placed under a car belonging to sports minister Denis Howell MP exploded outside his Moseley home. After over a year of trouble, the local *Daily Post* newspaper had dubbed the city 'Frontline Birmingham', but worse, much worse was to come.

After waiting in the shadows for nearly a year's worth of injuries and non-fatal wounds around Brum, the Grim Reaper strode out full and centre. In early November, Provisional IRA member James McDade was ordered to blow up a major telephone exchange in nearby Coventry. Attempting to plant the bomb, it blew up in his face, killing him instantly. But the Reaper was just getting started. On 21 November, terrorists planted time bombs at two pubs in Birmingham city centre, the Mulberry Bush and the Tavern on the Town. At the time, it was official IRA protocol to give a 30-minute advance warning of any attacks on civilian targets but on this particular night, all went badly wrong.

Well before the days of mobile phones, the operative detailed with making the warning call wasted many vital minutes desperately trying to find an unvandalised phone

box. Eventually he managed to ring the *Birmingham Post* and the *Birmingham Evening Mail*, giving the IRA codeword that authenticated any warning calls. But tragically, either in panic or confusion, the caller failed to name the two city centre pubs in which the bombs had been placed. The *Post* reported that the only information the warning gave was 'there is a bomb planted at the Rotunda and a bomb planted in New Street'. Police, military and emergency services frantically raced to the city centre, but at 8.17pm, just six minutes after the first phone call had been received, the first bomb ripped apart the Mulberry Bush. The blast blew a gaping hole in the concrete floor, which caused the roof to collapse on top of dozens of customers, trapping them beneath concrete blocks and steel girders. Others were horrifically burnt in the resulting inferno and some were impaled on broken furniture. One paramedic urgently called to the scene described what he saw as 'like a slaughterhouse'.

A few minutes later, and just a few hundred yards away, the second bomb exploded in the Tavern in the Town. It had been placed in a bag at the bottom of a staircase – the only exit out of the basement pub, trapping everyone inside, underground. The blast was so powerful that several victims were blown through a brick wall, their remains shredded between the flying rubble and the thick underground cables which supplied that part of the city with electricity. On finally gaining entrance into the underground bloodbath, emergency service workers were emotionally devastated by what they found. Trapped inside the basement bar, not one single person escaped major injury – or death. Ambulances queued three abreast the entire length of New Street, constantly ferrying the worst-injured to four different local hospitals. Dozens of taxis were commandeered to take those with minor injuries to less over-run and pressured A&Es around the West Midlands. Most of the dead were aged

between 17 and 30. One of the victims, 18-year-old Maxine Hambleton, had only entered the basement bar to quickly hand out tickets for her upcoming housewarming party and had been in the pub for just a few seconds before the bomb went off under her face on the stairs.

The two blasts killed 19 on the night – two would later die from their wounds. Some 184 were injured, many of them critically, losing limbs and suffering life-changing burns. The impact on Birmingham's large Irish community was immediate. Airport employees refused to work on planes travelling to and from Irish airports. Homes, shops, businesses and community centres across the city were attacked and some firebombed. People with Irish accents were regularly attacked in pubs, clubs and in the street. Alarmed at the fallout the bombings had caused, the IRA's Army Council placed the city 'strictly off limits' to its active service units and the bombings ceased for the foreseeable future.

The Troubles had impacted upon football too. In 1972, the Provisional IRA sent death threats to the SFA and individual Scottish players ahead of their British Home Championship match at Windsor Park in Belfast. Feeling they couldn't guarantee the safety of any of the British teams, the Northern Ireland football authorities suspended all home games until further notice. The game against Scotland was rescheduled and played at Hampden Park in Glasgow, where the security and safety of players and fans could be better assured. In the 1972/73 British Home Championship, Northern Ireland's 'home' games were played at Everton's Goodison Park. But the amount of security required put off the Everton board from ever staging them again. So in 1974, Northern Ireland's only scheduled 'home' British Home Championship match was once again played at Hampden Park. But no matter what

the problems over the Irish Sea, English football had a lot of problems of its own and the Grim Reaper would appear again – this time, inside a football ground.