

The Change Question

In 2018, issue no. 8 of the magazine *World Histories* asked several historians the question ‘is the world changing faster than ever before?’ I was asked to respond (and did so, of course). But the response that sticks in my mind is that of Professor Ian Morris, who wrote on the page facing my piece: ‘Take England: if we picked up a peasant from 1750BC and dropped him or her down in AD1750, just before the Industrial Revolution, he or she would have quickly adjusted. Some things had certainly changed: people had switched from round houses to rectangular ones; from farmsteads to (mostly) villages, from bronze to iron, from a sun god to Jesus. The rich now wore powdered wigs and corsets. A few could now read and write, some had eyeglasses, and, in 1784, a Scotsman could fly in a balloon. Yet so much had not changed. The basic patterns of life and death, taxes and rent, sowing and ploughing, deference to lords and ladies – the visitor from 1750 would recognise them all. But put that peasant back in the Tardis and catapult him to this age of cars, computers, TV, literacy, skyscrapers, gender reassignment, sexual freedom, democracy, nuclear weapons... our peasant would have a nervous breakdown.’

In promoting this view – that change is synonymous with technology – Professor Morris is echoing what many people think. But hold on. Just because Time A and Time B are unlike Time C does not mean that Time A and Time B have more in common with each other than they do Time C. Indeed, they might not have anything in common at all. Mice and crocodiles both have four legs, unlike humans, but that doesn’t mean they have more in common with each other than they do with humans. Mice are, after all mammals and crocodiles reptiles.

For this reason, I reckon that any attempt to compare 1750BC and 1750AD with 2018AD has to do more than just contrast modern technology with the lack of it. It has to look at the two earlier periods in relation to each other as well. Professor Morris selects a few contrasts but are they representative? What would a peasant from 1750AD have thought of the year 1750BC? Could he have ‘quickly adjusted’ in the way that Morris suggests a Bronze Age person would have ‘quickly adjusted’ to 1750AD? This is a moot point. An ordinary person from today could adjust to 1750AD, because he/she understands more or less what life was like then; we even speak the same language. But none of us has a chance of getting by in the Bronze Age. Likewise a peasant from 1750AD would have had a nervous breakdown is you had placed him/her in an environment without towns or roads, in which there were no markets and little choice but to believe the religions and customs of the time (sun gods, or whatever they were). We are talking of a time that saw tribal warfare and human sacrifice: certainly Celtic people were head hunters at a much later date, so I am not sure that the values of 1750AD really had much in common with those of 1750BC. Add in the famines and the absence of money, markets, codified laws, guns, clocks and land ownership and I think any visitor to the Bronze Age would have been way out of his depth, whether he travelled there from 1750AD or today.

On the day that my *Time Traveller’s Guide to Regency Britain* was published, I was walking with a copy of the book, thinking about the online lecture I was planning to give that evening to launch the book. As I walked over Mardon (a stretch of moorland above this town), it struck me that there is a very simple way to demonstrate all the above points. I took a picture of my book in front of the remains of a Bronze Age house, of the sort built around 1750BC, and a picture of my next-door neighbour’s house built in 1815 but broadly speaking reflecting the sort of house erected in the mid-eighteenth century. If one picture speaks a thousand words, two together speak a million.



The Bronze Age people would have had no idea what a book was, or possibly even what writing was: the earliest texts known in this country are many centuries later. Yet people from 1750 would have had understand the meaning and purpose of a book, even if they could not read and write, and would have understood almost all of it. We have so much in common with the people of Dr Johnson's and even Shakespeare's time that the post-Renaissance culture of the last five centuries is largely common to us all, and the moral life of the last few centuries is broadly one we still recognise, albeit with some reversals of prejudice against sex, race, creed and nationality. But to go back two or three thousand years? I would far rather try to get on with my eighteenth-century forebears and live in their houses than those of our Bronze Age ancestors. We are simply far closer to them – and they to us – in many, many ways.

Ian Mortimer,

15 November 2020