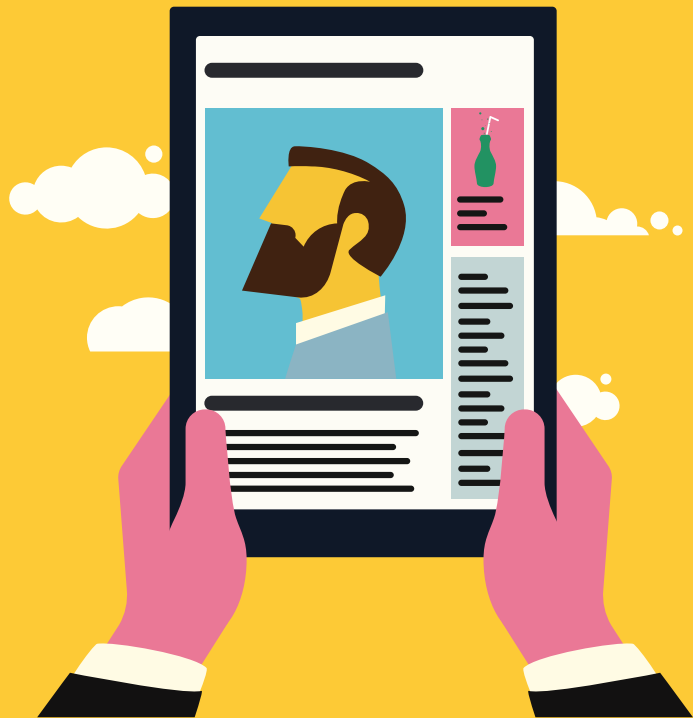


# THE COMMUTER CLUB



## A trip back in time to London, 1952...

The huge, majestic steam train rolls into Waterloo station and grinds to a stop. You step onto the smoke-filled platform. It is a bright, sunny morning in early June 1952, the year of Queen Elizabeth II's accession to the throne, and you've come to London for the day.

As you stroll through the ticket gates and leave Waterloo station, you find yourself reflecting on what a momentous period of history you are about to live through. Winston Churchill may still be Prime Minister, having led the country through the Second World War, but Britain is entering a period of immense and exciting change.

Just a few months ago, the country mourned. After a long illness, King George VI of Great Britain and Northern Ireland died in his sleep at the royal estate at Sandringham. He was just 56 years old and in the 16th year of his reign. Princess Elizabeth, the elder of his two daughters and next in line to succeed him, will be crowned Queen Elizabeth II on June 2, 1953, at the age of 25. The whole country, it feels, is now talking excitedly about the Coronation and our new Monarch.

Before making your way towards Westminster for a walk around your favourite parts of central London you stop to admire one of its newest landmarks, the breath-taking Royal Festival Hall, a magnificent building on the South Bank completed in 1951 which will quickly become the heart of London's art and culture scene. After years of war and austerity, it feels gloriously symbolic.

Still marvelling at the Hall's modernist architecture, you cross Westminster Bridge towards south Westminster, when something else catches your eye – bomb sites.

You remember how your friends in London suffered a few years before. During the Second World War the country was hit by more than 30,000 air-raid attacks, the vast majority of these aimed at the capital during those terrifying nights from September 1940 until May 1941. The Blitz.

Hitler's Luftwaffe had flattened huge swathes of central and east London. More than a thousand bombs fell on Westminster alone, severely damaging Parliament and the Palace of Westminster, with more than 200 high explosives raining down on the City of London, 100 on areas such as Holborn and Covent Garden and only slightly fewer on Farringdon and its surroundings.

But the city, and the whole country, bears the scars of the past with pride. You've even seen families in the suburbs transform abandoned bomb sites into flower gardens and allotments – your own children have turned one of them into a den where they play hide & seek and read comics.



London sights in the 1950s

As well as the bomb sites, you take in the unrepaired, empty and desolate houses. Housing, you can see, remains a major issue thanks to such extensive bomb damage. You heard from work colleagues that authorities have settled on something called 'high-rise' blocks of flats as the solution. They sound mysterious and futuristic – imagine, dozens of families living on top of one another in great, concrete columns. You remember reading that the first tower block went up in Harlow, Essex, in 1951. Soon more will appear all across London – in total, more than 2,700 housing tower blocks will be built over the next 50 years.

As you pass Big Ben and take in the sights and sounds of Westminster you exchange pleasantries with a newspaper vendor and pick up a copy of The Daily Mirror – Britain's most popular newspaper - to read on the train home this evening. 'Atomic Britain', proclaims the headline. You scan the front page and see that Britain is preparing to test its first atomic bomb later this year – in western Australia, of all places. Should we be worried by nuclear power?

With time to pass, you ignore the throngs of red London busses and black cabs and decide to walk back along the banks of The Thames towards the City of London. Even though it is a

sunny day, the air is calm and cool and a thick layer of hazy smoke hangs over the City. This is a feature of London life in the early 1950s. Little do Londoners realise that later this year disaster will strike in the form of the Great Smog. For five days in December, thick layers of air pollution, fed by Londoners' coal fires, will settle over the capital and kill 4,000 people through heart and lung conditions.

The City of London is busy as usual; officious-looking men in their bowler hats carrying umbrellas and looking important. The City is going through a time of enormous redevelopment after the Second World War. While landmarks such as St Paul's Cathedral survived the Blitz bombing, huge areas did not. Large-scale, modern redevelopment is beginning to emerge.

From the City, you hop on the London Underground to Holborn, where you emerge to a vibrant scene. Young women in flowery frocks and throngs of 'Teddy Boys' – teenage boys hanging around in button-down shirts and drainpipe jeans, skinny ties, leather shoes and that faintly ridiculous trademark quaffed-up hairdo. This is about to become the first big fashion craze of the 1950s.

Busy men and women dash in and out of bright red phone boxes that line the pavement. A Bing Crosby record is playing somewhere in the distance and it won't be long until the Elvis Presley craze reaches these shores. The whole atmosphere is bustling, fun and frivolous, a city shaking off the shackles of war and embracing dreams of the future.

You pay a visit to a Foyles book store to buy a new book recommended by a friend – The Caine Mutiny, by Herman Wouk. You look forward to reading it on the train on the way home. A cinema is showing 'Singin' In The Rain', starring Gene Kelly. Maybe the kids would like to see that. Or perhaps the new Agatha Christie play, The Mousetrap. Other news theatres are showing cartoons and are packed with children and young families enjoying the summer.

You stroll past a Woolworths store – one of London's early supermarkets - which is

crammed with customers. Lyons Tea vans line the side of Kingsway and they tempt you to drop into the famous Lyons Tea Shop for tea and cake. When you emerge a No68 bus sits chuntering merrily outside Holborn station. A group of tourists ask a policeman for directions. The everyday sights of London in the early 1950s.

Wandering up from Holborn to Farringdon it's now late afternoon and you decide it's time to make your way home. This means a long train journey – only one in three households owns a car and yours is not yet one of them. And, in any case, there are no motorways yet so going home by car would take hours. Besides, there's something about the charm of travelling on a steam train that you've always quite liked, and it'll give you a chance to begin reading *The Caine Mutiny*.

The steam train roars suddenly into life and pulls slowly away from the platform into the suburbs as the sun begins to set. As you leave 1950s London behind and the train clickety-clacks its way through Clapham Junction, Wimbledon and beyond you settle back into your plush, private train compartment.

Putting your book aside for the time being, you flick through the sport pages of the *Daily Mirror* newspaper you picked up from that friendly street-vendor in Westminster. The newspaper informs you that Manchester United are champions of Division One, having finished four points ahead of your beloved Tottenham Hotspur. Oh well, maybe next season, Spurs!

United and Spurs are followed by Arsenal, Portsmouth, Bolton and Aston Villa. Fulham and Huddersfield finished in the bottom two and were both relegated, while Liverpool finished in mid-table.

The name on everyone's lips this season has been Tommy Taylor, the exciting 21-year-old Barnsley forward who will go on to become Britain's most expensive footballer when he moves to Manchester United for £29,999 in March 1953. He will score more than 100 goals for United before tragically losing his life, aged just 26, in the 1958 Munich Air Disaster.



**A Lyons Tea Shop decorated for the Coronation**

You suddenly remember you must do your food shopping tomorrow. This will mean a trip to the local high street – the bakers, butchers, greengrocers and fishmongers – and will take up most of your morning. You also need to pick up some treats – salmon paste, tinned fruit and evaporated milk – for Sunday lunch with your family.

Dinner tonight, like every night, will be a 'meat and two veg' affair. Like most of your neighbours, you are having to get by during rationing. This means you are self-sufficient and still grow vegetables in your back garden. Some food, such as butter, meat and tea is still on ration as the country returns to normal after the war. Rationing will remain until at least 1954, you've been told.

As the train gathers speed you find yourself reflecting on the significance of the Coronation. This will be a momentous period of British history, there's no doubt about that – what will it be like? Little do you know, as you trundle, whistle and bounce home through the countryside, that this single event will bring the country together as never before.

More than 20 million people will watch the service on television, outnumbering the radio audience for the very first time. More than 10 million will watch in the homes of friends and neighbours, and 1.5 million in public places like pubs and cinemas.

Your family is one of the few on your street to own a television, and doubtless friends and neighbours will crowd around the tiny, 14-inch black-and-white set in your living room. It will be a joyous, social occasion, with a fireworks display on Victoria Embankment and street parties the length and breadth of the country.

For the first time, television cameras will be allowed inside Westminster Abbey, with television commentary by Richard Dimbleby. The Coronation will be watched around the world, with 85 million people in the US watching recordings of the highlights. This event will be the coming-of-age for the television and mark a modernisation of the monarchy.

As you make your way home in the summer twilight, little do you know that 70 years later, through decades of social, economic and political change, Elizabeth II will still be on the throne.

