

Summary of Accidents & Safety in Britain

From 1850 to 1970, Britain experienced significant changes in safety practices and regulations, driven by a series of industrial accidents, public health crises, and the demands of a rapidly industrializing society. The period saw the evolution of safety laws from rudimentary factory acts to comprehensive legislation that laid the groundwork for modern health and safety standards. These developments reflected the growing recognition of the importance of protecting workers and the public from the dangers associated with industrialization, urbanization, and technological advancement.

1850s: Early Industrial Accidents

1850 **Factory Act 1850** – Amends earlier Factory Acts, further restricting working hours for women and children, and introducing measures for better safety conditions in factories.

1852 **Explosion at Oaks Colliery, Barnsley** – A coal mine explosion kills 90 miners, highlighting the dangers in the mining industry and leading to increased calls for safety regulation.

1855 **Metropolitan Buildings Act 1855** – Introduces the requirement for safer construction practices in London, addressing issues like the spread of fire in densely populated areas.

1858 **Great Stink of London** – The overwhelming stench of untreated human waste on the Thames River prompts the government to invest in the construction of a modern sewer system, drastically improving public health.

1860s: Railways and Mines in Focus

1862 **Hartley Colliery Disaster** – A beam in a Northumberland coal mine snaps, causing the mine to collapse and leading to the death of 204 men and boys. This disaster results in the Mines Regulation Act of 1862, requiring mines to have two separate exits.

1865 **Armagh Rail Disaster** – A train derailment in Northern Ireland kills 18 people, leading to the introduction of stricter regulations for railway safety and signaling systems.

1868 **Abergele Rail Disaster** – A major railway accident in North Wales, where a train collides with runaway wagons carrying paraffin oil, causes a massive fire, killing 33 people. This leads to improvements in railway safety and regulations regarding the transport of hazardous materials.

1870s: Factory & Public Health Reforms

1871 **Factory and Workshop Act 1871** – Expands the scope of earlier Factory Acts, extending safety regulations to more types of workplaces, including workshops and non-textile factories.

1870s: Factory & Public Health Reforms (cont)

1878 **Factory and Workshop Act 1878** – Comprehensive legislation consolidating and expanding previous factory laws, enforcing stricter health and safety standards in the workplace and increasing the number of inspectors.

1880s: Significant Disasters & Legislation

1880 **Explosions at Seaham Colliery** – Two explosions in quick succession kill 164 miners, leading to increased scrutiny and calls for better safety regulations in mines.

1883 **Penistone Rail Crash** – A bridge collapse near Penistone, Yorkshire, causes a train to derail, killing 24 people. This accident leads to the implementation of stricter standards for bridge construction and maintenance.

1886 **Bristol Bridge Disaster** – A stampede on a narrow bridge during public festivities in Bristol leads to the deaths of 12 people and injuries to many others, resulting in the introduction of crowd control measures at public events.



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1880s: Significant Disasters & Legislation (cont)

1887 **Quarry Explosion, Caernarfon** – A major explosion at a slate quarry in North Wales kills 16 workers, prompting calls for safer working conditions in the quarrying industry.

1890s: Advances in Fire Safety

1890 **London Fire Brigade Establishment** – The London Fire Brigade is formally established as a professional fire-fighting force, following years of inadequate responses to fires in the capital.

1892 **Factory and Workshop Act 1891** – Introduces regulations for sanitary conditions, ventilation, and the provision of fire escapes in factories, aiming to reduce the risk of accidents and fires in workplaces.

1897 **Explosion at Tylorstown Colliery** – A mining explosion in South Wales kills 57 workers, leading to increased focus on improving safety measures in the coal mining industry.

1900s: Workplace Safety & Public Health

1901 **Boer War and Public Health** – The poor health of recruits for the Boer War leads to increased public concern about the health and safety conditions of the working class, eventually influencing public health policies.

1902 **Education (Provision of Meals) Act** – Following concerns about malnutrition among schoolchildren, this act allows local authorities to provide free school meals, contributing to the overall improvement of child health.

1906 **Workmen's Compensation Act** – Extends compensation rights for workers injured in the course of their employment, marking a significant step in workplace safety and workers' rights.

1908 **Mines Act 1908** – Limits the working hours of miners to 8 hours per day, addressing both safety concerns and the harsh working conditions in the mining industry.

1910s: World War I & Industrial Safety

1913 **Senghenydd Colliery Disaster** – The worst mining disaster in British history occurs at Senghenydd, South Wales, where an explosion kills 439 miners. The tragedy prompts major investigations into mine safety.

1914-1918 **World War I** – The war leads to the expansion of industrial production, but also to numerous accidents due to the increased pace of work and the use of untrained labor in dangerous occupations.

1917 **Silvertown Explosion** – A massive explosion at a munitions factory in London kills 73 people and injures over 400, leading to tighter controls on munitions production and storage during wartime.



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1920s: Post-War Reconstruction

1921 **Mining Industry Act 1920** – This act provides for greater government regulation of the coal industry, including safety measures and the establishment of a Coal Mines Reorganisation Commission.

1923 **Liverpool Overhead Railway Accident** – A train crash on the Liverpool Overhead Railway kills 6 people and injures many others, leading to improvements in railway signaling and safety procedures.

1924 **Rhondda Colliery Disaster** – A gas explosion at a South Wales colliery kills 32 miners, leading to further investigation and regulation of safety in coal mines.

1927 **Improved Safety Standards** – Following several major disasters, the government increases safety inspections and introduces new regulations for fire safety in public buildings and workplaces.

1930s: Economic Depression & Safety Initiatives

1930 **Accidents in the Depression** – The economic depression of the 1930s sees a rise in workplace accidents due to increased pressure on workers and employers cutting corners on safety.

1931 **Gresford Colliery Disaster** – An explosion at the Gresford Colliery in North Wales kills 266 miners, sparking public outrage and leading to an inquiry that criticizes the lack of safety measures.

1935 **Road Traffic Act 1934** – Introduces driving tests and speed limits in Britain, aiming to reduce the number of road traffic accidents.

1937 **Factories Act 1937** – Comprehensive legislation that consolidates and updates previous factory safety laws, introducing new measures for machine safety, working hours, and conditions in factories.

1940s: Post-War Safety Measures

1940-1945 **World War II** – The war brings about numerous industrial accidents, particularly in munitions factories and shipyards, as well as accidents related to air raids and blackouts.

1941 **Blitz and Fire Safety** – The bombing of British cities during the Blitz leads to the establishment of better fire safety procedures and the creation of the National Fire Service.

1943 **Bethnal Green Tube Disaster** – During an air raid, 173 people die in a crush at Bethnal Green tube station in London, leading to improved crowd control measures in shelters.

1945 **End of World War II** – The post-war period sees the government focus on reconstruction and improving safety standards across various industries.



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1950s: Modern Safety Regulations & Public Health

- 1950 **Mines and Quarries Act 1954** – A significant update to mining legislation, this act introduces new safety requirements for both mines and quarries, aiming to reduce accidents in these dangerous industries.
- 1952 **Great Smog of London** – A severe air pollution event in London leads to the deaths of an estimated 4,000 people, prompting the Clean Air Act 1956, which aims to reduce air pollution and improve public health.
- 1957 **Hither Green Rail Crash** – A train derailment near London kills 90 people, leading to calls for improved railway safety standards and the introduction of continuous automatic train control.
- 1959 **Factories Act 1959** – Further consolidates and updates factory safety regulations, emphasizing the need for better working conditions and machinery safety.

1960s: Advances in Industrial Safety

- 1961 **Factories Act 1961** – This act consolidates existing factory legislation, placing a greater emphasis on worker safety, particularly in relation to machinery, ventilation, and fire safety.
- 1963 **Aberfan Disaster** – A catastrophic collapse of a coal spoil tip in South Wales buries a school, killing 144 people, most of them children. The disaster leads to major reforms in mining safety and the management of spoil tips.
- 1966 **Aberfan Inquiry** – The public inquiry into the Aberfan disaster highlights the negligence of the National Coal Board and leads to significant changes in mining regulation and disaster prevention measures.
- 1967 **Haverhill Gas Explosion** – A gas explosion in a block of flats in Haverhill, Suffolk, kills eight people and injures many others, leading to new regulations on gas safety in buildings.

1960s: Advances in Industrial Safety (cont)

- 1969 **Robens Committee** – The committee is established to review health and safety regulations in Britain. Its findings lead to the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, which overhauls workplace safety regulations.

1970s: Precursor to Modern Safety Legislation

- 1970 **Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 (Preparation Phase)** – The findings of the Robens Committee begin to influence the development of comprehensive safety legislation, which will be enacted in 1974. This act is designed to modernize and consolidate workplace safety regulations across all industries, setting the foundation for the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).



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