

Victorian Britain

Power, Prestige, Prosperity – Britain in Mid-Victorian Times

In the first 50 years of the 19th century Britain had ‘witnessed a leap forward in all the elements of material well-being,’ the author of an article in *The Economist* wrote in 1850.

‘The extended application of machinery’, he continued ‘[is] almost putting an end to very severe* [...] bodily toil* except in agriculture.’ [quoted in D. Sherman, *Western Civilization*, vol. 2, 1995, p. 134.]. Britain’s economic position in that period seemed to support the optimism and confidence of the time and to justify the reference to Britain as ‘the workshop of the world’. From 1820 to 1888 the industrial production rose from £ 230 million to £820 million; in France from £230 to £488; in Germany from £85 to £583; in the USA from £55 to £1443. It has been calculated that in about 1861 the per head incomes of the UK, France and Germany were respectively £ 32.60, £ 21, £ 13.30. In spite of these figures, especially those relating to the incomes, there might have been quite a number of people who would probably rather have agreed with the opinion of an immigrant girl in Australia in 1846: ‘Old England is a fine place for the rich, but the Lord help the poor.’ [quoted in G.F.C. Harrison, *Early Victorian Britain*, Fontana 1979, p. 206.] Nevertheless, the general impression of Britain was that of a powerful and progressive country.



Image 1: Queen Victoria opens The Great Exhibition [Wikimedia Commons; source: artfinder.com; artist: Louis Haghe (1806–1885) colour lithograph; image in public domain]

On 1st May 1851 Queen Victoria opened an exhibition in London, entitled ‘The Great Exhibition of the Industry of all Nations’, though over half of the exhibits were from Britain.

Prince Albert, the Queen’s German-born husband, was one of the leading figures promoting the idea of putting on an exhibition to display the latest – mostly British – industrial and scientific achievements. It was a great success.

More than 6 million people visited the Crystal Palace, a large building in glass and steel in Hyde Park. It was the

centre piece of the exhibition ground. Prince Albert expressed the view that the exhibition would also help to promote peace between nations. But this hope was not really fulfilled. In 1854 the Crimean War broke out between Britain, France and Russia. It was the only European war Britain was involved in during Victoria’s reign. The idea of the exhibition had met strong opposition as there were fears of riots* and revolutions. These fears were not quite unfounded. In the 1830s the country had been plunged into a depression. Good harvests and the trade boom had come to an end. Industry had come to a standstill, unemployment had reached unknown dimensions. Hunger and misery had spread. In the years between 1832-51 a great number of people were involved in a variety of movements of social protests.

There were riots and strikes, so in Newport (Wales) in 1839 and various other parts of Britain in 1842. [see Stannitz, *Social Conditions and Reforms*]. Recovery came slowly, but at

the time of the Great Exhibition in 1851 it seemed that the 'radical thirties' and the 'hungry forties' were over.

Privileged, Comfortable, Labouring – Classes in Victorian England

In spite of the Industrial Revolution and the widening of the suffrage* the land-owning **upper class**, the aristocracy and gentry, continued to dominate political and social life. In 1873 the top group of the upper class, i.e. less than 7, 000 people out of a population of 31 million, owned 4/5 of the land in the UK. The composition of the Cabinet in the late Victorian period mirrored the political influence of this class. Until the 1880s most MPs were land-owners and held the majority of posts in many professions (law, church, civil service and the armed forces). The members of the aristocracy were known by their titles: dukes, marquises, earls, viscounts and barons. The heads of the aristocratic families formed the peerage* and sat in the House of Lords. In distinction from other classes the aristocratic families did not have to spend much time on earning their income which came essentially from their estates. Therefore they had enough free time for various other activities, such as horse racing, yachting, shooting, travelling and others. They lived part of the year on their country estates, where the 'great houses' were looked after by 40 to 50 domestic servants and an equal number of estate workers. From spring to August they often spent their time in their 'town houses' in London (the 'Season'), devoting themselves to social and political activities, such as balls, receptions, operas and political meetings. The country gentry, i. e. the lower nobility, could not afford a town house.

The pattern of upper class behaviour was characterised by the so-called gentleman ideal. A gentleman was expected to be honest, dignified and not too keen on money grabbing. A gentleman was polite and honourable to ladies, though he might occasionally be less gentleman-like with respect to the reputation of female servants and village girls.

According to a survey carried out in York, about a 30% of the population belonged to the **middle class**. The keeping of domestic servants marked the division from working class. At the top of this class (in London) were bankers and city merchants. The lower middle class was formed by shopkeepers and small businessmen, then white-collar workers, such as teachers and clerks. Income in the middle classes was based on non-manual jobs in business or the professions (law, medicine, education, religion, art and entertainment, literature and science).

For a decent standard of living £ 300 a year was thought essential in mid-Victorian times.

Clerks and teachers often earned as little as £ 60 – less than a skilled artisan perhaps. In the late Victorian period wages and earnings increased, so for example the station-master of St. Pancras (London) earned £ 265 in the mid-seventies. These figures, however, do not tell us how much of their income people had to spend on food, rent, etc.



5 *Image 2: Men in the St Marylebone workhouse, London c. 1903. [<http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/public-policy/introduction/uk.htm#UK%20government>, image in public domain]*

In the 19th century about 75% of the population were **working class**, earning their income from manual work. The working class was formed of labourers, farm hands, factory workers, railwaymen, domestic servants and others. Almost all workers were liable* to unemployment at some time. They

could be dismissed without being given notice. Besides unemployment there was always the possibility of sickness and the difficulties of old age. Having no provision for such times, unable to go on working and with failing health, all a worker (and his wife) could hope for was some support and shelter in his children's home. The only alternative was the dreaded way to the workhouse*.

The harsh regulations in such workhouses were probably meant to deter* people from asking the state for help. Inside the workhouse people had to wear uniforms, husbands and wives were separated, and children over seven from their parents. Inmates had to do hard unpleasant work, such as breaking stones and pulling apart old rope.

Fears and anxiety were prevalent* in the working class. Apart from worries about inadequate income, which meant not having enough to eat and being unable to pay the rent there was the concern for health, though some great diseases like typhus, cholera and tuberculosis had declined. Moreover there was the fear of accidents, such as in coal mines. Between 1894 and 1895 30% of all persons over 65 were paupers, i. e. extremely poor people.

3. The Urban Environment



25 *Image 3: Ludgare Hill, London 1897 Gustave Doré (1832–1883), French illustrator from London, A Pilgrimage, 1872. [Wikimedia Commons]*

A census* of 1851 showed that just over half the population of England and Wales lived in urban areas. From 1801 to 1901 the population in London grew from 2.6 million to 6.5 million and in Manchester from 309,000 to 645,000.

This process of urbanisation also meant an increase in population density. Whole families lived in a single room and if they could not find a room they moved into cellars. In 1842 there were 39, 000 cellar dwellers in Liverpool alone. In Glasgow in 1871 about 30% of the population lived in one-room dwellings. The areas of bigger towns, where overcrowding had increased, quickly turned into slums, which often were unsafe to visit without police escort. The rapid growth in the size of towns caused builders to put up many houses quickly. They were often badly built as there were no controls on building and no planning regulations before 1875. A well-known type of such houses were the so-called back-to-back houses. These were houses of three, sometimes only two rooms. The back of one house adjoined the back of another. They only had windows on one side.

Most of the houses were without water supply, drains or bathrooms. In parts of Manchester there was only one lavatory for as many as 215 people.

Apart from beggars there were often numerous thieves, often organised, as we read e. g. in Dickens' novel 'Oliver Twist'. Their number was estimated between 12, 000 to 15,000 in London. Some could afford to live at a middle class standard, but the risk of being caught and convicted was high. Often convicts would be transported to Australia. Between 1810 and 1852 some 140, 000 people were sent there, most of them for theft.

Another large group of the Victorian underworld, visible everywhere in large cities were the prostitutes. The number of people involved in the business, mainly women, is calculated between 8,000 and 80,000 for London, according to some authors even 200,000. The Victorians referred to prostitution as the great social evil. Middle class morality tried to ignore it and novelists like Dickens did not allude* to it openly. Prostitution of very young girls was not uncommon, but then sexual intercourse with a girl was only an offence if she was under 12 years old. The age limit was later first raised to 13 and in 1885 to 16 years. Surveys and interviews with women of the trade show that most had a working class background and were driven into the trade by low wages and harsh working conditions. It appears that men often sought the service of such women not only because of sexual desire but also because of the companionship these women offered, i. e. a more relaxed time together than they probably experienced in their middle class homes. Respectable women, particularly from the middle class, were obliged to stick to a very strict pattern of moral behaviour, whereas for men a double standard of morality was tacitly* admitted.



Image 4: In a London Gin Palace (before 1851); Wikimedia Commons; source: "The working man's friend, and family instructor" Vols 1-2 (25 Oct 1851);author: artist unknown; image in public domain]

One of the favourite leisure time activities was drinking. In 1876, the peak year for beer consumption, each individual consumed about 155 litres per year. In 2004 the figure was 99 litres for Britain. The statistical figures include all ages and both sexes. It seems that drinking was mainly a lower class problem. The houses of these people were the least homely and work was often unpleasant and harsh. Drinking helped to forget and not to notice. One might guess why a later well-known Victorian ballad began "Please, sell no more drink to my father." [quoted in G. Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain 1851–75*, Fontana, 1979, p. 243].

Political Participation

As pointed out above especially in the early Victorian period Britain was politically dominated by the small group of the upper class. The Industrial Revolution strengthened the economic position of the growing middle class, who expected a greater share of political participation. The working class, by far the largest group in Victorian society, hoped to improve their

social situation by gaining more political influence. One of the demands was for more equal constituencies* which no longer reflected the distribution of the population. The Whig* government tried to introduce reforms in 1830 but was first met by a strong opposition from the House of Lords. Finally they backed down and passed the Great Reform Bill in 1832. Their consent possibly came just in time when considering the revolutionary movements in Europe in the 1830s and the 1840s. The suffrage based on the Reform Bill was only slightly extended, but the new industrial towns like Birmingham and Manchester were now represented in Parliament. The urban middle class consequently had an increase in political say, but the working class was still excluded from the reforms.

10 In 1838 a working class protest movement came into existence. They were called the Chartists, as they had summarised their demands in a charter [see Stannitz, Social Conditions and Reforms]. The Chartist Movement gradually disappeared, partly because of the lack of support from the middle class and partly because the social conditions for the working class improved. Reforms that followed up to 1884 fulfilled most of the demands of the Chartists. In 15 spite of the reforms there were only about 30% of the total adult population in 1911 who had the right to vote.

The Woman Issue

A Victorian journal summed up the role of women in mid-Victorian times in the phrase that “married life is a woman’s profession”. Accordingly middle class women in households were not expected to have a job. This was one of the things that marked them out as different from the working class. Even if young women had an adequate job they had to resign when they got married. In the late Victorian period teaching had become one of the professions for middle class women, especially, when education for children under ten years old had been made compulsory in 1870.



Image 5: Victorian school class
[www.eRiding.net]

25 By the end of the 19th century three quarters of all teachers were women, though their male colleagues got higher salaries. Apart from teaching clerical* work became more and more a predominantly female occupation.

Most working class women did not have a choice whether or not they went to work. Their families simply needed the additional money to survive. Working class girls and women often worked in small workshops or in their homes doing jobs, such as sewing or making match boxes or candles for extremely low wages. Others did factory work or were in domestic service which around 1890 was the biggest category of female employment, with almost one out of three of all girls between 15 and 20 years old.

35 The ideal middle class wife was supposed to be “the angel in the house”. Religion reinforced the idea that wives were servants to their husbands and seemed to support the view that

women (of the middle class) should not get any pleasure out of sex. “Close your eyes and think of England”, was the advice given to young women. What both working class and middle class women had in common was the fact that they had hardly any rights. When for example a young woman married all her possessions became her husband’s property. It was not a crime when a husband hit his wife, and the children were legally the husband’s. A few middle class women dared to campaign for women’s rights, including Annie Besant (d. 1933) and Josephine Butler (d. 1900), who also both fought for birth control and socialism.

One of the most successful campaigns carried out by women was for better education. When school education had been made compulsory for children under 10 all children had to do reading, writing, arithmetic, but some subjects were just for girls. A school syllabus for girls in Bristol in 1899 listed lessons such as ‘how to light a fire’, ‘removing tea stains’, and ‘porridge making’ [quoted in L. Bellamy, *The Changing Role of Women*, J. Murray 1966, p. 59]. A school inspector pointed out that “a girl is not necessarily a better woman because she [...] can work a fraction* in her head” [quoted in Bellamy, *ibid.* p. 58]. By 1900 women had won many improvements in their education and also in their legal rights. After 1882 they were allowed to keep their own income and property after they married, but they were still denied the vote in general elections and barred* from holding political office.

The campaign to win the vote for women had become a mass movement in the 1880s. In spite of many activities, such as leaflets, petitions and public meetings, women’s suffrage was refused 15 times in Parliament up to 1900. Radical suffragist groups turned to more violent actions in the years before World War I, such as heckling* government ministers at political meetings, provoking arrests, occasional attacks on property, arson*, bombing and sabotage. When in prison activists for women’s’ rights often went on hunger strike and were force-fed*. One of the prominent figures of the campaigners was Emmeline Pankhurst (d. 1928). She and her daughter had formed a radical group, nicknamed ‘suffragettes’. The Pankhursts were as most of the campaigners of middle class background. The violence of the radical women played into the hands of the anti-suffragists. At an earlier stage of the movement Queen Victoria had commented: “This mad, wicked folly of ‘Women’s Rights’.”[quoted in *The New Penguin Dictionary of Modern History, 1789–1945*, 1994, p. 884]. It was not until 1918 that Parliament passed a law which gave all women over thirty the right to vote. At the outbreak of the World War I all women campaigners suspended their activities. In 1928 the suffrage was extended to all women over twenty-one. It was not until 1979 that a woman, Margaret Thatcher, became the first Prime Minister of Britain. The first German woman chancellor was Angela Merkel in 2005.



Image 6: Queen Victoria , Prince Albert –he died in 1861 –and their nine children [unknown photographer, Wikimedia Commons]

End of an Era

In 1901 Queen Victoria died after a reign of nearly 64 years, then the longest in the history of the British

monarchy so far. Many felt that an era, which had been named after her during her lifetime, had come to an end. The nostalgic feeling prevailed that her reign had been an age of security and could be referred to as the good old days. In the whole period of her reign Britain was indeed involved only in one major European war, the Crimean war, as mentioned above. But
5 Britain had to put up with numerous minor wars, conflicts and uprisings outside Europe, including the rebellion against British rule in India in 1859 and the South African wars fought between British and Afrikaners in 1888 and from 1899 to 1902. Apart from the military conflicts the working and living conditions of the majority of the people in Britain, especially in mid-Victorian times, darken the picture of the good old days.

10 Neither Victoria's accession to the throne in 1837, nor her death in 1901 was according to most historians real turning points in the history of that time. Rather it was The Great Reform Bill of 1832 that marked the beginning of a new epoch, an epoch that saw the beginning of the political influence of the middle class. At the other end it was the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and the following war experience that did away with Victorian ideals and norms.
15 However, certain patterns of behaviour and memories seem to live on. When the author of this text was a student in England some decades ago his landlady referred to her husband as a Victorian, probably implying that he was a man of strict seriousness and rather prudish* views.



25 *Image 7: Queen Victoria in 1887 (Photo taken by Alexander Bassano)*

When Queen Victoria celebrated her Golden Jubilee in 1887 *The Times* (20 June, 1887) commented that “seldom, perhaps, have so many princely visitors assembled to take part”. [Haight, (ed.), *The Portable Victorian Reader*, Penguin 1972, p. 43]. As Victoria and her husband Albert were related to many high noble families in Europe – for example Wilhelm II, German Emperor since 1887, was Victoria's grandson – it was also like a family reunion.

Her diamond celebration in 1897 with among others representatives from the dominions*, Indian rajas, Burmese mandarins and African chieftains reminded the English people of the extent of the British Empire. With Victoria's dynastic ties all over Europe she had become the ‘Grandmother of Europe’ and with regard to the Empire she was the ‘Great White Queen’.

30 The glory of the Empire and the feeling of a golden age could not conceal the fact that in the last decades of the 19th century Britain was losing ground, economically as well as politically. The USA and Germany began to challenge Britain's position and in certain areas to overtake the level of British production. For instance, in 1880 Britain produced one third of the world's steel, by 1902 this had shrunk to one seventh of the world total, whereas both
35 Germany and the USA produced more than Britain. Britain had the world's largest textile industry and the largest market for dyes*, but the development of the dye was left to Germany which also took the lead in the general production of chemicals. The British economy neither kept up with developments in new industries, nor adapted new techniques in the older indus-

tries. Britain among others probably lagged behind, because of her backwardness in scientific research and education. Education in Britain, critics pointed out, was biased* towards classical and literary studies, engineers were regarded as inferior in prestige and status to the traditional professions. In 1913 Germany produced six times as many science graduates as Britain.

5 By 1871 the political map of Europe had been transformed: there were two unified states, the German Empire (since 1871) and the Italian kingdom (since 1861). One of the consequences of this new balance of power was a new and fervent* quest for colonies, especially in Africa, creating suspicion and hostile feelings among the greater European powers.

10 In the new Germany Britain not only met a formidable* industrial competitor, but also, seen from an English point of view, a dangerous naval rival, which seemed to threaten Britain's supremacy* at sea.

These developments finally led among others to the catastrophe of the First World War. When Britain had declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, the British foreign minister Grey remarked: "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall never see them lit again in
15 our life time." [quoted in Lowe, *Mastering Modern British History*, Macmillan, 1988, p. 441].

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