

Social classes of england in the victorian era

[History](#), [Middle Ages](#)



The Victorian Era During the Victorian Era, social classes of England were newly reforming, and fomenting. There was a churning upheaval of the old hierarchical order, and the middle classes were steadily growing. Added to that, the upper classes' composition was changing from simply hereditary aristocracy to a combination of nobility and an emerging wealthy commercial class. The definition of what made someone a gentleman or a lady was, therefore, changing at what some thought was an alarming rate.

By the end of the century, it was common that a gentleman was someone who had a liberal public (private) schooleducation, no matter what his antecedents might be. There continued to be a large and generally disgruntled working class, wanting and slowly getting reform and change. Conditions of the working class were still bad, though, through the century, three reform bills gradually gave the vote to most males over the age of twenty-one. Contrasting to that was the horrible reality of child labor which persisted throughout the period.

When a bill was passed stipulating that children under nine could not work in the textile industry, this in no way applied to other industries, nor did it in any way curb rampant teenaged prostitution. The Victorian Era was also a time of tremendous scientific progress and ideas. Darwin took his Voyage of the Beagle, and posited the Theory of Evolution. The Great Exhibition of 1851 took place in London, lauding the technical and industrial advances of the age, and strides in medicine and the physical sciences continued throughout the century.

The radical thought associated with modern psychiatry began with men like Sigmund Freud toward the end of the era, and radical economic theory, developed by Karl Marx and his associates, began a second age of revolution in mid-century. The ideas of Marxism, socialism, feminism churned and bubbled along with all else that happened. The dress of the early Victorian era was similar to the Georgian age. Women wore corsets, balloonish sleeves and crinolines in the middle 1840's. The crinoline thrived, and expanded during the 50's and 60's, and into the 70's, until, at last, it gave way to the bustle.

The bustle held its own until the 1890's, and became much smaller, going out altogether by the dawning of the twentieth century. For men, following Beau Brummell's example, stove-pipe pants were the fashion at the beginning of the century. Their ties, known then as cravats, and the various ways they might be tied could change, the styles of shirts, jackets, and hats also, but trousers have remained. Throughout the century, it was stylish for men to wear facial hair of all sizes and descriptions.

The clean shaven look of the Regency was out, and mustaches, mutton-chop sideburns, Piccadilly Weepers, full beards, and Van Dykes were the order of the day. Due to the lack of modern technology that we have today such as televisions and the internet, the Victorian era (the era in which Queen Victoria reigned, this was between 1837 and 1901) was renowned for famous short stories that the authors of the time wrote. The birth of the railway also took place during the Victorian era and as one would expect, many people used it for transportation over long distances.

There were no televisions so at times of boredom and during these long train journeys the people of the time depended solely on books and short stories for entertainment. The Ghost story genre proved to be most popular amongst the Victorian people. At the beginning of the nineteenth century in Britain, religious faith and the sciences were generally seen to be in beautiful accordance. This harmony between science and faith, mediated by some form of theology of nature, continued to be the mainstream position for most men of science right up to the 1860's, at least.

But it did come under threat. Many scientists questioned the literal meaning of the Genesis and opposed to the authoritarianism of organized Christian religion. Charles Darwin was the one, who with his *Origins of the Species* in 1859, proved things that could not be tolerated by the Church. It attracted widespread interest on publication. The book was controversial because it contradicted religious beliefs that underlay the then current theories of biology, and it generated much discussion on scientific, philosophical, and religious grounds.

Of course a longer period had to pass to accept Darwin's ideas, but it did affect the Christian mind, it did raise questions about the institution of the Church. The values that were based on religion were shaken greatly as well and the roots of the 20th century's search for new values could be originated from here. Attitudes toward values and morals in those times also depended on, which social class a person belonged to. As the population increased, the gap between the lower and upper classes grew larger and also the differences in social behavior.

Lower working classes struggled with everyday life, large families often did not have anything to eat, and children had to go working from an early age. There, the morals were drawn to the background. Even though, every felony was punished strictly, people often ended up stealing, robbing and murdering. Cities were full of slums, hygiene was non-existent and the drinking water spread diseases. Among these circumstances there was one rule that existed: to survive the day!

Opposing the upper classes' primness, prostitution and child labor was not scorned as a livelihood for the common people. Society as a whole, was called and often talked about in connection with the Victorian Era, did not help them, did not do anything for them, only despised them. Victorian values included a strict moral code and an obsession with social status. Upper classes always liked to lead their life in an exemplary way, regarded the morals highly and lived accordingly. Their occupation and social standing was largely determined by family background and social connections.

We have to take into consideration that the Victorian era was the one when educated and wealthy people knew that the period they were living in is great and society, if everyone in it lived according to the Victorian values, could be happy. Although by looking back at the way they treated these values, most of them seem hypocritical. In their life religion, family, home, wealth and primness played an important role and proud as they were of themselves of belonging to these great times, rejected anyone whose life was not based on these things.

They were the lucky ones that were educated and could easily afford forming opinions about the rest of the society, making references to morals, making up their own and forming the old ones as well. The Victorian era became notorious for employing young children in factories and mines and as chimney sweeps. Child labor played an important role in the Industrial Revolution from its outset, often brought about by economic hardship, Charles Dickens for example worked at the age of 12 in a blacking factory, with his family in debtor's prison.

The children of the poor were expected to help towards the family budget, often working long hours in dangerous jobs and low wages. In England and Scotland in 1788, two-thirds of the workers in 143 water-powered cotton mills were described as children. Agile boys were employed by the chimney sweeps; small children were employed to scramble under machinery to retrieve cotton bobbins; and children were also employed to work in coal mines to crawl through tunnels too narrow and low for adults. Children also worked as errand boys, crossing sweepers, shoe blacks, or selling matches, flowers and other cheap goods. 7] Some children undertook work as apprentices to respectable trades, such as building or as domestic servants (there were over 120, 000 domestic servants in London in the mid 18th Century). Working hours were long: builders worked 64 hours a week in summer and 52 in winter, while domestic servants worked 80 hour weeks, children worked from 12 to 16 hours a day; they often began working at the age of six or seven. Children had to be beaten to keep them from falling asleep while at work; in spite of this, many failed to keep awake and were mutilated or killed.

Parents had to submit to the infliction of these atrocities upon their children, because they themselves were in a desperate plight. Craftsmen had been thrown out of work by the machines; rural laborers were compelled to migrate to the towns by the Enclosure Acts, which used Parliament to make landowners richer by making peasants destitute; trade unions were illegal until 1824; the government employed agents provocateurs to try to get revolutionary sentiments out of wage-earners, who were then deported or hanged.

Such was the first effect of machinery in England. Children as young as three were put to work. A high number of children also worked as prostitutes.. In coal mines children began work at the age of five and generally died before the age of 25. Many children worked 16 hour days. As early as 1802 and 1819 Factory Acts were passed to regulate the working hours of workhouse children in factories and cotton mills to 12 hours per day. These acts were largely ineffective and after radical agitation.

A royal commission recommended in 1833 that children aged 11-18 should work a maximum of 12 hours per day, children aged 9-11 a maximum of eight hours, and children under the age of nine were no longer permitted to work. This act however only applied to the textile industry, and further agitation led to another act in 1847 limiting both adults and children to 10 hour working days. By 1900, there were 1.7 million child laborers reported in American industry under the age of fifteen.

The number of children under the age of 15 who worked in industrial jobs for wages climbed to 2 million in 1910. The accepted reasoning was that

the career for women was marriage. To get ready for courtship and marriage a girl was groomed like a racehorse. In addition to being able to sing, play an instrument and speak a little French or Italian, the qualities a young Victorian gentlewoman needed, were to be innocent, virtuous, biddable, dutiful and be ignorant of intellectual opinion.

A wealthy wife was supposed to spend her time reading, sewing, receiving guests, going visiting, letter writing, seeing to the servants and dressing for the part as her husband's social representative. For the very poor of Britain things were quite different. Fifth hand clothes were usual. Servants ate the pickings left over in a rich household. The average poor mill worker could only afford the very inferior stuff, for example rancid bacon, tired vegetables, green potatoes, tough old stringy meat, tainted bread, porridge, cheese, herrings or kippers.

The Catholicism of the Oxford Movement, the Evangelical movement, the spread of the Broad Church, and the rise of Utilitarianism, socialism, Darwinism, and scientific Agnosticism, were all in their own ways characteristically Victorian; as were the prophetic writings of Carlyle and Ruskin, the criticism of Arnold, and the empirical prose of Darwin and Huxley; as were the fantasy of George MacDonald and the realism of George Eliot and George Bernard Shaw.

One could say that Queen Victoria personified the spirit of nineteenth-century England; she was Queen of the United Kingdom, Great Britain, and Ireland as well as Empress of India. She put the “Victorian” in the Victorian Era.