

# Class differences in victorian london



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## Outcast London

The Victorian Era in London proved a time of growth in many aspects of society while other facets were completely forgone. The wealthy in Victorian London enjoyed a life of ease and convenience, while the working class struggled in multiple ways to survive. Despite their distance from the harrowing struggles that the working class were forced to face, the wealthy in London society notoriously feared the poor and attempted to stay away from them either because of their distance from, or perhaps knowledge of, the reality of the poor people's lives. This fear was understandable, as the lives of the poor were extremely unfamiliar, but it was also a bit exaggerated and largely rooted in the wealthy's insecurities.

As the gap in income between the poor and the wealthy grew in London, so did the fears of the Victorian elite. It is not clear exactly how many people lived in London's worst conditions, but it is estimated that about " 8. 4 per cent (354, 444) lived in extreme poverty"[1]. While this does not seem like much of London's population, because the poor were condensed into such small areas overcrowding became a large problem and required the formation of slums, which further made poor people the " other," the mystery of their existences frightening wealthier Victorian Londoners. The slums developed because of the forced overpopulation of specific areas in London, most famously areas of both East London and South London. [2]Housing in the slums often consisted of large, once nice townhomes wherein multiple families lived in each room, which enabled the spread of disease[3]. To live further away from the middle of town was nearly impossible, as, " the poor were trapped in the centre of town, not only by the

cost of transport, but also by the nature and location of their work"[4]. The inaccessibility of outer London for the poor both limited employment options and was the driving force of the desperate search for housing and employment the poor undertook. The want of the people in these sections of London did cause an influx of crime, which, inevitably, included prostitution and stealing. The commonality of crime contributed to the reputation of the East part of London as a decrepit and disgusting slum, contributing to the ambiguity of these areas already shrouded in grime and mystery. Slums were an inevitable part of Victorian London's expansion, but wealthy Londoners were unaware of the conditions in these cramped streets.

To combat the linked problems of overcrowding and too few jobs, the government passed the Poor Law in 1834, which required workhouses be built around London to provide room and board for those that were unable to hold a job, including abandoned wives, the elderly, and the sick.[5] However, the workhouses were seen as terrible places to live, and their menacing presence in London frightened both poor and wealthy people. The government incited this fear into the lives of the citizens on purpose to keep them from ending up in the workhouses, but many impoverished people were still forced by their unfortunate circumstances to rely on them. Because the living conditions were just as bad, if not worse, than many of the homes the extremely poor lived in, many families preferred to stay on the streets, their freedom intact, performing criminal acts to earn money to survive rather than live in the workhouses. While the intention of the workhouses initially seemed good, it was inferred that before the workhouses were established, " there was a real suspicion amongst the middle and upper

classes that they were paying the poor to be lazy and avoid work"[6]. Thus, the 1834 Poor Law was first and foremost intended to save the wealthy people money by opening regulated shelters rather than help the poor to not only survive with the bare minimum, but prosper. The rich people's fear of the poorer sections of London stemmed from their refusal to help the poor by providing accommodations that were livable. They blamed the terrible living conditions on the poverty stricken, rather than the external factors that contributed to this poverty, and villainized them by calling them unambitious and lazy.

However, without the amount of people in poverty, much of the industry in London would not have been able to succeed, as the poor were willing to do the jobs the wealthier members of Victorian society refused to do, such as work at the docks handling the imports and exports and in the warehouses producing everyday items[7]. Those at ease financially often failed to realize that their goods were produced by those that they were afraid of. The poor relied on these jobs to live, which ensured that they were always completed, though the conditions were often terrible to the laborers.

While many of their fears are a result of the economy favoring the rich, wealthier people did, however, have something to fear from the poorer areas. Their security as well off members of society felt at risk as a result of the worsening slums, and, " the horrific Jack the Ripper killings in 1888, ... reinforced the general impression that the East End represented the deepest abyss (another much-used image at the end of the century) into which urban man could fall"[8]. Jack the Ripper's murder spree in the East End gave the wealthy another reason to fear the poor and the areas they inhabited. While

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the treachery of these killings triggered much fear into all Victorian Londoners, it was ultimately fear of losing their wealth and status that drove the Victorian elite's fear of the poor, and it kept them from feeling much sympathy for those in poverty, despite the poor often being unable to keep a consistent job. Even though the wealthy Londoners had less of a chance of losing their lifestyle than those cursed with inconsistent work, they failed to be able to understand the plights of the less fortunate and attempted to keep them at a distance despite the close proximity of the poor areas to the wealthy ones.

The misfortune of the poor as opposed to the grandeur of the lives of the rich, and the lack of understanding between the two groups, separated them further and planted the idea of " Outcast London" in the wealthy people's heads. " Outcast London" represented the worst of the worst; the dirtiest and most dangerous of slums was the image in the minds of most people when they thought of these undesirable parts of town. However, the poor areas of town were not strictly separated like they were originally thought to be. Charles Booth found that, " striking maps of London in which the poverty levels of individual streets were colour-coded challenged simplistic polarizations between a wealthy West End and an impoverished East End by demonstrating that pockets of poverty were to be found in many other districts"[9]. This discovery fueled more fear from the wealthy Londoners; many of them did not realize how close the slums were to them, as many of them thought that the impoverished areas were completely separate from the wealthier areas.

The wealthy Londoners were not fully to blame for their intense fear of the poor, as the poorer areas around London were rampant with crime and disease because of the overcrowding and lack of jobs. Most wealthier people had never experienced the slums firsthand, rather they had heard about it from news sources or books, so they were afraid of the impoverished yet failed to understand the motivations behind the poorer citizens' actions[10]. The desperation many impoverished people faced, uncommon to the upper class, often caused them to take on crime as a profession in order to care for themselves and their families. However, while some of this fear is justified, the wealthy are somewhat to blame for their lack of action. Even after light was shed on the miserable conditions the poorer citizens faced, and despite the lower class's complaints of harsh treatment from the workhouses, the rich continued to support the Poverty Law of 1834. While in reality, the workhouses were not as bad as many depicted them to be, people were still discouraged from living in one because of the lack of freedom a person had while in one[11]. As a result, the poor continued to practice crimes the Victorians found immoral, such as prostitution and thievery because these industries provided a more reliable income than any of the inconsistent odd jobs the poorer people hoped to get.

The fear the Victorian elite felt for the lower classes makes logical sense — people are afraid of what they are unfamiliar with — but the extent to which they remained ignorant about their surrounding neighborhoods and neighbors shows the general population's indifference and disregard for the poor. Whether it be because of insecurity about money, or the state of their fragile social statuses, wealthy Londoners in the 19<sup>th</sup> century wished to stay

as far from the lower classes as possible in order to avoid strife in their own lives. The selfishness the wealthy practiced is not uncommon in humans, and because of the lack of travel options, many of the wealthy people had never been near a poverty-stricken neighborhood, and thus were terrified of the fanciful stories others fabricated about the slums. However, this does not fully excuse them from the treachery caused. Many Victorians waited passively for things to be fixed, as,“ throughout the century, down to the 1880s, *laissez-faire* private enterprise had to be proved wanting before the Victorians would accept the inevitability of political action and government sponsored social reform”[12]. Without the urging of the wealthy Victorians, government policies moved more slowly, as the wealthy had the strongest voices in society, highlighting their fear and, in some cases, cowardice.

The Victorian period in London caused many problems, but it also allowed for revolutionary social reforms. The wealthy were afraid of the poor, but they were also afraid of becoming the poor. Their insecurity often prevented them from taking action to help the impoverished, and, as a result, the slums grew worse. Until authors such as Charles Dickens and other nonfiction authors began to expose the conditions of the slums, wealthy Victorian Londoners stood paralyzed in fear in their sheltered communities. Their fear was for good reasons, as the slums were not without danger, but the deterrence was also a product of the distaste the wealthy held for those in the classes below them.

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