



# Victorian Schools

## All children go to school

Many children in early Victorian England never went to school at all and more than half of them grew up unable even to read or write. Although some did go to Sunday schools which were run by churches. Children from rich families were luckier than poor children. Nannies looked after them, and they had toys and books. A governess would teach the children at home. Then, when the boys were old enough, they were sent away to a public school such as Eton or Rugby. The daughters were kept at home and taught singing, piano playing and sewing. Slowly, things changed for poorer children too. By the end of the Victorian age all children under 12 had to go to school. Now everybody could learn how to read and write, and how to count properly.

## Schools

There were several kinds of school for poorer children. The youngest might go to a "Dame" school, run by a local woman in a room of her house. The older ones went to a day school. Other schools were organised by churches and charities. Among these were the "ragged" schools which were for orphans and very poor children.

**School room** The school could be quite a grim building. The rooms were warmed by a single stove or open fire. The walls of a Victorian schoolroom were quite bare, except perhaps for an embroidered text. Curtains were used to divide the schoolhouse into classrooms. The shouts of several classes competed as they were taught side by side. There was little fresh air because the windows were built high in the walls, to stop pupils looking outside and being distracted from their work. Many schools were built in the Victorian era, between 1837 and 1901. In the country you would see barns being converted into schoolrooms. Increasing numbers of children began to attend, and they became more and more crowded. But because school managers didn't like to spend money on repairs, buildings were allowed to rot and broken equipment was not replaced.

## Teachers

Children were often scared of their teachers because they were very strict. Children as young as thirteen helped the teacher to control the class. These "pupil teachers" scribbled notes for their lessons in books. They received



certificates which helped them qualify as teachers when they were older. In schools before 1850 you might see a single teacher instructing a class of over 100 children with help of pupils called “monitors”. The head teacher quickly taught these monitors, some of them as young as nine, who then tried to teach their schoolmates. Salaries were low, and there were more women teaching than men. The pale, lined faces of older teachers told a story. Some taught only because they were too ill to do other jobs. The poor conditions in schools simply made their health even worse. Sometimes, teachers were attacked by angry parents. They shouted that their children should be at work earning money, not wasting time at school. Teachers in rough areas had to learn to box!

## Pupils



After 1870, all children from five to thirteen had to attend school by law. In winter in the countryside, many children faced a teeth chattering walk to school of several miles. A large number didn't turn up. Lessons lasted from 9am to 5pm, with a two hour lunch break. Because classes were so large, pupils all had to do the same thing at the same time. The teacher barked a command, and the

children all opened their books. At the second command they began copying sentences from the blackboard. When pupils found their work boring, teachers found their pupils difficult to control.

## Lessons

Victorian lessons concentrated on the “three Rs”-Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic. Children learnt by reciting things like parrots, until they were word perfect. It was not an exciting form of learning! Science was taught by “object lesson”. Snails, models of trees, sunflowers, stuffed dogs, crystals, wheat or pictures of elephants and camels were placed on each pupil's desk as the subject for the lesson. The object lesson was supposed to make children observe, then talk about what they had seen.

Unfortunately, many teachers found it easier to chalk up lists describing the object, for the class to copy. Geography meant yet more copying and reciting - listing the countries on a globe, or chanting the names of railway stations between London and Holyhead. If you look at a timetable from late in the 1800s and you will see a greater number of subjects, including needlework, cookery and woodwork. But the teacher still taught them by chalking and talking.



## Slates and copybooks

Children learned to write on slates, they scratched letters on them with sharpened pieces of slate. Paper was expensive, but slates could be used again and again. Children were supposed to bring sponges to clean them. Most just spat on the slates, and rubbed them clean with their sleeves. Older children learned to use pen and ink by writing in “copybooks”. Each morning the ink monitor filled up little, clay ink wells and handed them round from a tray. Pens were fitted with scratchy, leaking nibs, and children were punished for spilling ink which “blotted their copybooks”. Teachers also gave dictation, reading out

strange poems which the children had to spell out correctly.

## Reader

Slates showing pictures and names of different objects hang from the walls of the infants class. The children chant the name of each object in turn. When they can use these words in sentences they will move on to a “reader”. This would probably be the Bible. For reading lessons, the pupils lined up with their toes touching a semi-circle chalked on the floor. They took it in turns to read aloud from the bible. The words didn't sound like everyday words, children stumbled over the long sentences. Quicker readers fidgeted as they waited for their turn to read. School inspectors slowly realised that the bibles language was too difficult. Bibles were gradually replaced by books of moral stories, with titles like Harriet and the Matches. A reader had to last for a whole year. If the class read it too quickly, they had to go back to the beginning and read it all over again!

## Abacus

The pupils used an abacus to help them with their maths. Calculations were made using imperial weights and measures instead of our simpler metric system. Children had to pass inspections in maths, reading and writing before they could move up to the next class or “standard”. Teachers were also tested by the dreaded inspector, to make sure that they deserved government funds.

## Cane

Teachers handed out regular canings. Look inside the “punishment book” that every school kept, and you will see many reasons for these beatings: rude conduct, leaving the playground without permission, sulkiness, answering back, missing Sunday prayers, throwing ink pellets and being late. Boys were caned across their bottoms, and girls across their hands or bare legs. Some teachers broke canes with their fury, and kept birch rods in jars of water to make them more supple. Victims had to choose which cane they wished to be beaten with!



## Dunce's Cap

Punishment did not end with caning. Students had to stand on a stool at the back of the class, wearing an arm band with DUNCE written on it. The teacher then took a tall, cone-shaped hat decorated with a large "D", and placed it on the boys head. Today we know that some children learn more slowly than others. Victorian teachers believed that all children could learn at the same speed, and if some fell behind then they should be punished for not trying hard enough.

## Drill

When its time for PE or "drill", a pupil teacher starts playing an out-of-tune piano . The children jog, stretch and lift weights in time to the awful music. It is like a Victorian aerobics class! Even when the teacher rings a heavy , brass bell to announce the end of school, the pupils march out to the playground in perfect time

## Playtime

Outside the classroom is a small yard crowded with shrieking schoolmates. Games of blind mans buff, snakes and ladders, hide-and-seeK and hopscotch are in full swing. Some boys would beg a pigs bladder from the butcher, which they would blow up to use as a football. Others drilled hob nails through cotton reels to make spinning tops.