

The Victorian Age

This text deals with the **Victorian Age**, a period of time that began with the death of **King William IV**, when his niece **Victoria**, who was only **18**, ascended the throne. She was to reign for **64 years** and she became the symbol of a whole era, hence the **Victorian Age**.

Actually, the **Victorian Age** covers a period of time longer than the actual reign of **Queen Victoria**, because it also includes the so-called “**Edwardian Age**” (named after **Edward VII**) which covers the years between **Victoria's death in 1901** and the outbreak of the **First WW**.

When Victoria became queen, **England** was in a difficult situation: there was **discontent among the working class** and, to make the situation worse, a period of bad crops led to **10 years of misery**, the infamous “**hungry forties**”.

In general, the **Victorian age** was complex, marked by **political, social and religious unrest**. The country underwent a gradual process of **democratization**. Moreover, greater freedom was granted to **Catholics**, thanks to the actions of the **Oxford Movement** that advocated reforms in favor of the **Church of Rome**.

In the **Victorian Age**, one particular class benefited the most from the changes, the **middle class**. It increased in power and took over the reins of government; it was also favored by **industrialization** and progress in the **technological field** and the resulting prosperity.

However, on one hand, **colonial expansion** was promoted, **scientific research** was encouraged, and **transportation improved**. The belief that happiness could be reached through **technical progress** developed a sense of **optimism** throughout the country.

On the other hand, there was a part of society, mainly the **working class**, where **misery and distress** were still widespread. In fact, the new urban conditions, with the growth of **slums**, had created serious health problems. Whole families were often crowded in single rooms, where lack of hygiene led to **cholera**.

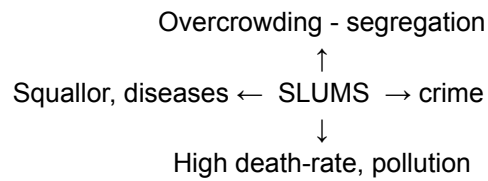
To sum up, the **Victorians** prided themselves on their **welfare, manners, and values**, but this led them to ignore the problems that afflicted **England**.

It is necessary to point out the **life conditions** in the **Victorian towns**. By the middle of the **19th century**, **Britain** had become a nation of **town dwellers**, mainly due to **industrial development**. Finding solutions to the **overcrowded urban environment** was the heart of the **Victorian political and social reforms**. In fact, housing for the majority of the poor was famous for its **squalor, disease and crime**, particularly in the **slum districts**. The **mortality rate** was high and terrible working conditions in polluted atmospheres had a disastrous effect, especially on **children's health**. The **Common Lodging Houses Act** and **Labouring Classes Lodging Houses Act** were passed to clean up the towns, devastated by **cholera and tuberculosis**. However, the changes were slow and, as a result, there were lots of **terraced houses** and **slum districts**.

On the positive aspect, **medicine** also underwent a **radical change**: **professional organizations** were founded to regulate and control **medical education** and research, and **modern hospitals** were built. Other services were also introduced, such as **water, gas and lighting**, paved roads and places of entertainment. Even now, **Victorian institutions** can still be seen in **British cities**.

Furthermore, **law and order** were among the major problems of the **urban environment**, and **modern police forces** were needed to keep cities under control. In **1829-30** Prime Minister **Robert Peel** established the **Metropolitan Policemen**, who were called “**Peelers**” after their founder's name.

→ QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS



1. Identify the main features concerning urban life.

There was a huge rise in population: by the middle of the century, Britain had become a nation of town dwellers. The solution of many problems linked to the overcrowded urban environment was the heart of Victorian political and social reforms.

2. Summarize the reforms enacted to improve the lives of many Victorians.

The Government promoted an effective campaign to clean up the towns, devastated by cholera and tuberculosis. Moreover, medicine gave a radical change to society: professional organizations were founded to regulate and control medical education and research and modern hospitals were built.