

SCRAPBOOK



In the year of the 60th anniversary of the accession of Queen Elizabeth II, this issue of *ETp* takes us back a mere hundred years or so to the time of Queen Victoria, the only other British queen to celebrate a Diamond Jubilee, and looks at education in the UK in the Victorian era. As you will see, some things are very different today – although some haven't changed much at all.



History

When Queen Victoria came to the throne at the age of 18 in 1837, education was still mainly for the privileged few. Children from wealthy families might be taught at home by a governess until they were old enough – if they were boys – to go to Public Schools such as Eton or Rugby. (A word of explanation here: in most countries, the term *public school* means just what it says,

schools for the general public. In Britain, though, a Public School, note the capitals, has always been a private fee-paying school and, therefore, very much *not* for general consumption!) Most poor children didn't go to school at all on weekdays: they had to work in order to contribute to their family's income. However, there was a system of education based in churches, the Sunday School, which had been started by Robert Raikes some years earlier. By the early 1830s, 1,250,000 children (about a quarter of the school-age population at the time) received some education in this way.

In 1833, the government awarded grants of money to schools for the first time, and in 1844, a law was passed which required children who worked in factories to be given six half-days of schooling every week. Schools were set up to provide free basic education for orphans and very poor children. These were called 'Ragged Schools' because the children generally wore tattered clothes.

Some of the people who ran the schools were themselves unable to read, so the standard of education was somewhat erratic!

In 1870, Parliament passed the Forster's Education Act, requiring all areas of Britain to provide schools for children aged five to 12. However, not all these schools were free so many parents could not afford to send their children to them. As attendance at school was not compulsory, many children didn't go – not least because their earning power was valued by parents and employers.



Teachers

Many Victorian teachers had no formal training; few had even been in higher education; they just learnt 'on the job' as a kind of apprenticeship. When they reached school leaving age, abler children could stay on as 'pupil teachers' who would help the teacher in exchange for lessons.

Some larger schools used a monitor system. The teacher would choose some of the brightest pupils to be taught by the headmaster in separate lessons after school. The following day, each of these monitors would be assigned a group of fellow pupils and would teach them what they themselves had just learnt.

In Victorian schools, the teachers were often strict and by modern standards very scary. Children soon learnt to do what they were told, otherwise they would get a rap across the knuckles with a ruler, or a clip around the ears. Victorian teachers would often use a cane to punish naughty children, hitting them on the hand or the behind, or sometimes across the back of the legs. In Public Schools, even prefects would carry canes and use them on younger pupils. Other favourite punishments were the writing out of 'lines' – either long poems or hundreds of repetitions of sentences such as 'I must not be late for school' (or whatever the offence had been). The tolerance level was pretty low and all sorts of things might attract punishment: being rude, answering back, speaking out of turn, poor work ... in fact, anything that displeased the teacher. Children who had been punished at school usually kept quiet about it because, if their parents found out, there was a good chance that they would be punished again at home!



Classes

Many schools were rather grim buildings, often with classroom windows set high up to prevent the children looking out and being distracted. Drab by today's standards, they might perhaps have a stern text as the only wall decoration. Boys and girls were usually separated; they used different entrances and had separate playgrounds. In smaller schools, both sexes might be taught in the same classroom, but they would still sit separately.

GEMS, TITBITS, PUZZLES, FOIBLES, QUIRKS, BITS & PIECES, QUOTATIONS, SNIPPETS, ODDS & ENDS, WHAT YOU WILL

Many schools had very large classes. One school in Hitchin, for instance, had a classroom which seated 300 children! Large classes meant that everything tended to be done in a rather regimented way. The teacher would write information on the blackboard and the pupils would copy this into their books and learn it off by heart. A large part of education consisted of rote learning: memorising names and dates from history or reciting the 'times tables' (multiplication tables). Children were also expected to commit many other things to memory, such as poems – and Victorian poems tended to be many-paged epic ballads!



For handwriting practice, a specially-ruled book was used: the copybook. The first line was printed, or copied carefully from the blackboard, then the children would have to fill the entire page with identical lines. They used dip pens, which they loaded with ink by frequently dipping the metal nibs into ink wells on the desk top. (Fountain pens had been invented, but were not very reliable and were not mass-produced until the 1880s.) An overloaded nib would make a blot in the book, and this is the origin of an expression still used today: to 'blot your copybook' means to make a serious mistake.

To do arithmetic, the children had to use the Victorian equivalent of a calculator: the abacus, a frame with sliding wooden beads. This tool has been in use for many centuries all over the world; seeing a proficient user at work is impressive – in many cases they can still out-perform today's electronic counterparts!

Stories were used a great deal in schools to instil morals and to caution children about the consequences of unwise behaviour. These were known as 'Cautionary Tales'. Some of the more extreme, such as the popular translation of the German *Der Struwwelpeter*, warned of very dire consequences indeed: such as not looking at where you are going resulting in drowning, and sucking your thumbs leading to impromptu amputation!



The school day

The school day began at 9.00 am and finished at 5.00 pm. In the middle of the day, there was a two-hour break, which allowed enough time for the children to go home for lunch, although in rural areas where their houses were likely to be further away they might eat at the school. (Also in the country, many children took time off school to help with the harvest, dig potatoes and do other farmwork.)

Although most of the Victorian child's school day was rather boring, some playtime was allowed. Children had various toys to play with, including hoops, tops, skipping ropes and marbles. They also played team games such as tag, hopscotch and football.



Sickness

Medical care was expensive in the Victorian age and few poor families could afford to see a doctor. Although children were often frightened of getting sick, some of the 'cures' were even scarier. For whooping cough, a common childhood disease, one recommended cure was to swallow a spider in butter! If a child felt ill at school, the teacher might administer a cheap 'medicine' such as James Morrison's Universal Pill – said to cure every single ailment, but actually just a mixture of aloes



and cream of tartar! As you may gather, medical understanding in the Victorian era was rather limited.

Charles Darwin's grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, was a physician, philosopher and scientist, but not much good in any of these fields. One of his beliefs was that sleep could cure disease and that spinning around really fast was a very good way of inducing sleep. Later, the American physician Benjamin Rush adapted the treatment: he believed that spinning would reduce brain congestion and, in turn, cure mental illness. He was wrong – he just ended up with dizzy patients who were still disturbed!



Literature

The view of schools as portrayed in Victorian literature ranges from the rosy to the tormented. Written towards the middle of the 19th century, the novels *Jane Eyre*, *Dombey and Son* and *David Copperfield* all include terrifying accounts of the abuse and neglect of schoolchildren, while in 1857 the famous *Tom Brown's Schooldays* triggered an avalanche of popular fiction set in schools, usually boarding schools (Public Schools).

This trend for school-themed literature began to die down in the mid 20th century, but still appears now and again in various forms – perhaps the latest of these are the Harry Potter books (and films)!

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