

# Overview of the Victorian Era

## By Anne Shepherd (2001)

Queen Victoria (1819-1901) was the first English monarch to see her name given to the period of her reign whilst still living. The Victorian Age was characterised by rapid change and developments in nearly every sphere - from advances in medical, scientific and technological knowledge to changes in population growth and location. Over time, this rapid transformation deeply affected the country's mood: an age that began with a confidence and optimism leading to economic boom and prosperity eventually gave way to uncertainty and doubt regarding Britain's place in the world. Today we associate the nineteenth century with the Protestant work ethic, family values, religious observation and institutional faith.

For the most part, nineteenth century families were large and patriarchal. They encouraged hard work, respectability, social deference and religious conformity. While this view of nineteenth century life was valid, it was frequently challenged by contemporaries. Women were often portrayed as either Madonnas or whores, yet increasing educational and employment opportunities gave many a role outside the family.

Politics were important to the Victorians; they believed in the perfection of their evolved representative government, and in exporting it throughout the British Empire. This age saw the birth and spread of political movements, most notably socialism, liberalism and organised feminism. British Victorians were excited by geographical exploration, by the opening up of Africa and Asia to the West, yet were troubled by the intractable Irish situation and humiliated by the failures of the Boer War. At sea, British supremacy remained largely unchallenged throughout the century.

During the Victorian heyday, work and play expanded dramatically. The national railway network stimulated travel and leisure opportunities for all, so that by the 1870s, visits to seaside resorts, race meetings and football matches could be enjoyed by many of this now largely urban society. Increasing literacy stimulated growth in popular journalism and the ascendancy of the novel as the most powerful popular icon.

The progress of scientific thought led to significant changes in medicine during the nineteenth century, with increased specialisation and developments in surgery and hospital building. There were notable medical breakthroughs in anaesthetics - famously publicised by Queen Victoria taking chloroform for the birth of her son in 1853 - and in antiseptics, pioneered by Joseph Lister (1827-1912). The public's faith in institutions was evident not only in the growth of hospitals but was also seen in the erection of specialised workhouses and asylums for the most vulnerable members of society.

Whilst this brief overview can only partially summarise some characteristics of the nineteenth century, it does illustrate that society was disparate and that no one feature can serve to give a definitive view of what it meant to be "Victorian". Rather, it is better perhaps to consider the multifarious and diverse research that has evolved in recent years and make up your own mind. This History in Focus may serve to begin that process.