English History: Victorian Period in England

(Projektna naloga, predmetu informatika)

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Introduction

Queen Victoria reigned over sixty years and gave her name to an age that still makes a great impression upon the imagination.

In Victorian age the political power of the crown was much weakened – it never recovered again. But the monarchy was still needful to both government and people. Its new role was to be a model for private probity and interest in arts, sciences and good works. Many people of the lower classes looked on it as their role model and they tried to follow their unwritten instructions.

Things quite changed when Victoria became the mourning black widow of Windsor after her husband died. She was attacked for not fulfilling her public role as a Queen, but she soon made redundant – she became Empress of India, and now had control over the world’s greatest empire. Also, she was respected simply because she was a Queen for such a long time.

Once the crown was popular again, it provided the grey world of Industrial Revolution splendour and shine it needed. Population rose enormously and the society was held together by almost nothing but their moral values, but instead of social confrontation this was an era of remarkable progress.
1. Queen Victoria

Victoria became queen in 1837, at the age of eighteen. She had little real power over the world's most powerful country, but politicians listened to her strong opinions. She loved the idea of empire and she was pleased with the title 'Empress of India'. She was the mother of nine children and the grandmother of most of the kings and queens of Europe. When she died in 1901, very few people remembered a time before the Victorian Age.

(Beddall, 2006, page 32)

Victoria (Alexandrina Victoria) was born in Kensington Palace, London on 24 May 1819. She was the only child of Edward, the Duke of Kent and Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg. From birth she was formally styled Her Royal Highness, Princess Victoria of Kent, but within her family she was called Drina. Her private tutors, Reverend George Davys and Baroness Louise Lehzen (also her governess) taught her Italian, English, German, Chinese, French, Greek, history, arithmetic and music. History was her favourite subject.

King William IV had no legitimate children to take the throne, so his niece, Princess Victoria, became heiress to the throne. King William was still under the age of 18, so she needed a Regent in case King William would die while she was still a child. Victoria's Regent would be her mother, but since King William hated her, he swore to stay alive until Victoria turned 18. He succeeded and died of a heart attack in 1837, months after Victoria had turned 18. She was now officially Queen of the United Kingdom. Her coronation took place on 28 June 1838.

Her government was controlled by the Whig Party, and its Prime Minister was Lord Melbourne. He quickly became a very important person in Victoria’s life – because she was politically inexperienced, she relied on him for his advice. But his Party was growing unpopular and soon he resigned, but came back after a while.

Victoria soon married her first cousin, Prince Albert. Their wedding took place on 10 February 1840 in the Chapel Royal of St. James's Palace in London. Queen Victoria was dressed in white – she started the tradition of white wedding dresses. Their marriage was very happy. First of their nine children was born in November 1840. The little girl was named Victoria.

During her early years as a Queen, Victoria had to deal with at least five assassination attempts. Those crimes were punishable with death, but Prince Albert found that too harsh, so he encouraged the Parliament to pass the Treason Act. Under that law, any assault with a weapon in presence of a monarch was punished with seven years of prison and whipping, which is pretty merciful.

Unfortunately, some assassins who attacked Queen Victoria were actually punished with whipping.

Victoria loved Ireland. In times of the famine (Great Hunger) in Ireland, she personally donated 2000 pounds sterling to the poor people. But still she permitted the export of cattle and grain from Ireland to England, where over a million Irish people starved. But Albert, having seen how his marriage and birth of the child upset her, refused to establish a royal residence in Ireland.

Victoria’s husband, Albert, died of fever in 1861. Victoria entered a state of mourning and wore black for the rest of her life. She was called “Widow of Windsor” and sometimes she became very bound to her manservant John Brown. Their secret love story and, as some say, even marriage, is the theme of a 1997 movie Mrs. Brown.

Soon after that Queen Victoria celebrated Victoria’s Golden Jubilee. She was once more very popular in Britain. In 1897 she was the longest reigning monarch in British history.
While Victoria was celebrating Christmas, she died of bleeding in her brains on 22 January 1901. She was 81 years old. She was buried beside Prince Albert in the Frogmore Mausoleum in Windsor Great Park. Because Victoria did not like black funerals, London was decorated in purple and white that day. Victoria's death was the end of the rule of the House of Hanover.
2. Important events in Victorian Era

2.1 The Corn Laws
During the Napoleon Wars Britain tried to isolate the Napoleonic Empire, hoping that they would fall in some sort of economic trouble. That meant that goods in the British Isles were protected from any competition from the outside. And this meant that farmland was now very profitable.

When the wars ended the first of the Corn Laws was introduced. It said that no foreign corn should be allowed into Britain until British corn reached a price of 80 shillings per quarter. Rich landowners benefited, but the working people from cities had to spend most of their income on corn just to survive, so they did not have any money for manufactured goods, which meant that manufacturers had to lay off workers, etc.

Many groups of people fought against the Corn Laws. Most noticeable groups were the Chartists and the Anti-Corn Law League. Anti-Corn Law League was successful and in 1846 the government repealed the Corn Laws.

2.2 Chartism
The Chartist Movement was an attempt to improve the people’s rights. This document was a petition outlining the following demands:

- Institution of secret voting (voting anonymously)
- General elections be held annually (every year)
- Members of Parliament not be required to own property
- Members of Parliament be paid a salary
- Electoral districts (districts of voters) of equal size
- Universal male suffrage (right to vote)


Chartist delegates first gathered in London in 1839. Their gathering became known as the National Convention and it adopted the motto “peaceably if we may, forcibly if we must.”

They gathered over 1.25 million signatures in their support and then presented the charter and the signatures to the Parliament, but the authority was afraid of losing their own positions, so they rejected the charter. After this defeat the Chartists tried twice more, but always failed.

Still, they created a framework for all the future working-class movements.

1 In this content Corn means any sort of grain.
2.3 The Great Exhibition

In 1851 Prince Albert had a great idea. He wanted to organise a great event—an exhibition. He called it The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations. It was mostly all about the success of industrial revolution. The government set up a Royal Commission, which called for architectural ideas of an exhibition hall. The exhibition was to be held in Hyde Park, so the hall had to be enormous. The Commission did not like any of the plans; they were either too ugly or too expensive. But then one of the architects—Joseph Paxton raised public support and his plan had to be accepted.

His plan was to build a glass and steel structure, which looked somewhat like a giant greenhouse. The building was built and became known as the Crystal Palace. It covered an area six times bigger than St. Paul's Cathedral and it contained 4000 tons of iron and 10,000 feet of glass.

The profit from the exhibition was used to buy land in Kensington where several museums were built. Crystal Palace was taken apart after the exhibition and reassembled in Sydenham, where it later burned to the ground.

Figure 3: The Crystal Palace

http://www.flatrock.org.nz/topics/history/assets/crystal_palace.jpg
2.4. Late Victorian Age

This was the time of Irish Question – whether or not the Irish should be allowed to rule themselves. Irish extremists began a campaign of terrorism.

But also good things happened. Education was made much more accessible for the lower class, and voting was now a privatizing. According to the fact that everybody could read, now the most common form of entertainment was reading aloud.

The British Empire was constantly growing and because of industrial revolution people began to move from country to cities. This made the growth of rails even easier and workers were now taking holidays in seaside resorts, which soon offered a lot of entertainment.

Aristocracy lost power they had because of land and the new aristocracy was one of money and wealth, not of land. The most powerful people became businessmen. However, titles remained very important in British society.

3. Living in Victorian Era

3.1. Aristocracy

Actually, the idea of hierarchy was universally accepted. Aristocracy still had its wealth and culture. For aristocrats, it was important to own a land, which is why people from lower classes that wanted to join their ranks, invested mostly in estates and country houses. In 1870’s 80% of the land in the United Kingdom was owned by seven thousand people out of a total population of 32 million. Aristocrats dominated every aspect of life – politics, government, art, fashion, education, honesty and loyalty, set by the Queen and Prince Consort, public duty and donations of any sort to the poor – that is why they were popular in the classes below, who agreed with the aristocracy ruling them.

Most of the upper-class families owned a large house with gardens and parkland in the country and also a house in London for the season. Because the railways were everywhere, they had weekend parties in their London homes. All houses were very comfortable, amusingly decorated and had a lot of servants (some even three hundred). There was also a lot of entertainment.
Living in Victorian Era


3.2. The Middle Class

The middle class was embracing everyone from the skilled workers to businessmen. They were mostly urban classes involved in the production of manufactures, raw materials and other goods. A lot of people owned a shop. The future of the country depended on the skills of its professional men, that is why this age is also called the age of the professions. Society needed more doctors, lawyers, apothecaries, engineers, architects and many other specially qualified people. These formed a large amount of organizations such as the Royal Institute of British Architects or the British Medical Association.

All people in middle class had two things in common: the wife did not work and the household had at least one servant. The middle class lived in villas in the suburbs. Each of them had a back and front garden, basement and attic rooms for the servants. As a result of mass manufacture, these houses also had running water, indoor toilets and bathrooms, gas lights and gas stoves. Moving a little downwards there were houses that held onto each other and formed a street. They had windows that were standing out of the house – those are called bay windows. Another common feature were porches, a covered platform at the entrance to a house. Their status was also determined by the amount of decoration on the outside walls of the house.

3.3. The Working Class

The working class consisted of a wide variety of people. At the top of this complex hierarchy stood the skilled worker and at the bottom the unskilled workman. There was no solidarity between them – this was not a friendly social class to live in. Much of the work people did was noisy, dangerous and boring. Life was the hardest between the period when the first child
was born, because the mother stopped working, and when that child was old enough to earn his own living.

They lived in “two up, two down” joined (terraced) houses, and often there was more than one family in the house. There was no decoration and no running water (it appeared towards the end of the century). Their toilets were outside of the house and they looked a lot like closets. They heated their homes with coal and lighted with candles, oil or paraffin. With time cheap wallpaper and linoleum added some feeling of comfort to the houses. Sometimes workers also lived in flats called ‘model dwellings’. One thing about homes of the working class was very important: it had to be within walking distance of their place of work.

3.4. Mass of the poor, unemployed and unemployable

The poor, unemployed and unemployable were the people at the bottom of all. Three million people immigrated between 1853 and 1880 and it was the inflow of humanity that found no place in the already existing hierarchy. Victorian city had these slum areas, where those people lived. No person from a middle or upper class ever entered such a ghetto with a policeman to guard them, but these areas were not really afraid for their lives because dispersing any unruly masses was now the task of the police. But they were afraid for their living area and that meant for their master. The poor had no power and were the by-products of a society that only men could make a difference.

3.5. Girl Power

Victorian Britain was a sternly patriarchal society. Women were of secondary importance and they were being paid only a third or two thirds of the men’s salary. They were mostly employed in domestic service and the textile industry, common jobs were serving in a shop, being a milliner, governess or a teacher. But most women of the lower classes were servant girls. From the middle classes women could do things sometimes, they could become doctors and some could become charity inspectors, some of them were in politics.

But women got some independence in 1857, when divorce became possible. By the 1880s women could do things such as going to university, competing in tennis and golf, they could become doctors, and some could even vote. Newspapers and magazines got a women’s section, some of them were already written entirely for them.
3.6. Children

Children of the lower classes were used in all branches of industry, and they were unprotected against physical abuse. They disappeared from factories because new machines could do their work, and not because of the government intervention. The Education Act laid down, that every child must receive elementary education until the age of ten.

Upper class children were well looked after. They were brought up by nurses, governesses and tutors. They lived in a separate part of the house from their parents.

Figure 7: Piano Lesson

3.7. Honourable men/women in Victorian Britain

First of all you need to know that every rank of people accepted their place in the society, that they all had some things in common and that was religion, the queen, respectability and charity.
The basic beliefs of Christianity were accepted by everybody, even by those who did not go to church. The Church of England was divided in two: the Evangelicals and the High Church movement. Also, Roman Catholics came back, and soon after that a shocking fact was discovered. 40% of the population never went to church. Meanwhile, educated classes were split in two because of the Darwin’s The Origin of Species by Natural Selection – it challenged the creation story. But overall, the Victorian age was a deeply religious one.

Respectability was also honoured in all ranks. It brought the idea of hard work. A good respectable man was never in debt, he paid his way, he kept out of trouble and bore life’s burdens with a polite smile. The unrespectable persons were the extravagant, the drunkard, the promiscuous and people who used state’s money to survive. But to be a respectable man required a lot of money from middle class and skilled workers, who still had a hard life.

Homes became more important – it was held together by religion and ruled by the man.

Charity was also a very honourable thing to do – in towns there were a lot of new hospitals and orphanages built, and charities extended even to animals.

### 3.8. Holiday and Leisure

Holiday and leisure has now extended to the many. People worked five and a half days – half-day on Saturday. Bank holidays were once a year. But in the 1870s there came Bank Holidays, Whit Monday, Whit Monday and the first Monday in August.

In the country life was still peacefully going on, but the people who migrated to towns brought with them things that middle class found strongly offensive, like cockfights, bullfights, prize fights, gambling, drinking and attending executions. As a consequence of that there came drinking, gambling and prostitution. That is why the middle class set up a few new rules and restrictions.

While the lower class was drinking and fighting, the middle and higher classes were bustling in public parks, reading in libraries, attending concerts, willing to give the lower classes basic scientific education. New sports emerged like cricket and football. Football was a sport for all levels of society, while cricket was a sport fit for rich gentlemen.

Travelling to London or the seaside in holidays was now something all classes could enjoy. The same thing happened with theatre, concerts and choral societies. The working class was everyday guest in pubs and dance saloons. People also began to read literature that Bible and Prayer Book. All classes have learnt to read, there was an explosion of newspapers, cheap editions of classic novels, history books etc. They began teaching history in schools for cementing national identity.
Living in Victorian Era

Figure 8: Seaside

Picture 8: Seaside

Conclusions

Victorian Era was an era of great changes and pressures on the British people, but also an era of success. Britain was the first country in Western Europe to undergo such a transformation – other countries were only to begin emulate in the 1880s. Society was more varied, changeable and dynamic by 1901, but yet it was still sticking together. Status could now not be achieved only by birth, but also by competitive examination.

There were significant changes in art and architecture (The Crystal Palace), many buildings were built in Gothic, medieval, Italianate, Tudor style, for example the Highclere Castle (Hampshire) and Kelham Hall (Nottinghamshire). The clock tower of the Houses of Parliament, known as Big Ben, was built in 1859. Prince Albert was largely responsible for one of the defining moments of the era, the Great Exhibition of 1851.

In 1848 the great Potato Famine struck Ireland.

People’s lives have changed a lot. There was running water and cheap decoration for the working class, suffering in ghettos for the lower class, and huge, comfortable country houses for aristocracy.

Newspaper and literature became widely available because everybody could read. Everyone enjoyed sports (football), dancing saloons, pubs etc. All children got elementary education and women were given more rights.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1837</td>
<td>Victoria became Queen – the beginning of the Victorian era</td>
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<tr>
<td>1839</td>
<td>first gathering of Chartists in London</td>
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<td>1846</td>
<td>The Corn Laws are repealed</td>
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<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>The Great Hunger (Potato Famine) in Ireland</td>
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<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>The Great Exhibition</td>
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<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>Big Ben was built</td>
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<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td>the first underground railway in London</td>
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</tbody>
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\[2\] That was the year of Victoria’s death and the end of the Victorian Era.
Bibliography
