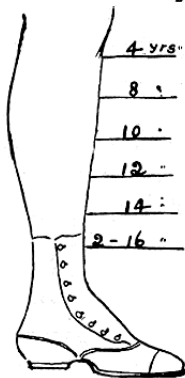




Queen Victoria
(1837-1901)

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The proper length for little girls' skirts at various ages.

Victorian prudery: an 1868 idea of how the hemline should descend towards the ankle as a girl got older. (Harper's Bazaar)



A Victorian dandy.

The Victorian Age

The word 'Victorian' is generally associated with the ideas of **respectability, propriety, church-going.**

✿ The middle class was the most powerful class. It was divided into upper and lower. The upper middle class included industrialists, bankers and businessmen, lawyers and members of the professions; this class had great power because economy was in their hands and consequently they controlled or influenced the policy of the government. The other component was the lower middle class, i.e. shopkeepers and commercial travellers, post office workers, civil servants and clerks; in short, people who worked at 'respectable' jobs, or jobs which did not involve working with their hands. They were conscious of their position above the working-class and eager to climb.

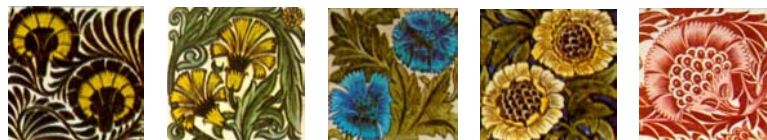
The British middle class was descended from the Puritans, and retained many of their distinctive features: **stern moralism, restraint, industry and sense of duty.** Sexual habits were kept under strict control, and were used to establish the moral value of people; great importance was given to chastity. Women in particular had to follow inflexible laws; some transgression was tolerated in men.

The family was a most important institution, dominated by the figure of the 'master', i.e. the father: according to a famous saying "the husband and wife are one and the husband is that one". In 1870 the average family had five or six children.

Many activities like prayers and reading the Bible were carried out inside the family, and particular attention was devoted to those relating to culture, like **reading aloud to the family** gathered in the drawing room or playing music. The piano was almost a household god, and girls were taught to play and to sing.

This 'respectable' bourgeoisie stamped everything with its mentality and moral standards, dictating its code of behaviour to everybody else. This is why **books had to be educative and avoid scandalous subjects,** and all the forms of art had to convey a moral teaching. The result was often the respect of the formal aspects of virtue, i.e. **hypocrisy,** because they never renounced their greed for material success.

The **obsession with good manners** was perhaps the attempt to compensate for the lack of lineage or noble blood.



✿ In the Victorian Age **materialism and economic interest** (and the idea of property) were dominant, and labourers were ruthlessly exploited, but nobody openly spoke of utilitarianism; on the contrary, **charity flourished,** often tinged with benevolence and condescension. This was one aspect of the Victorian Compromise, that is, the desire to avoid drawing extreme conclusions, in an attempt to reconcile opposite tendencies: materialism and spiritualism, scientific spirit (e.g. the spreading of Darwin's theory of evolution) and religious feeling, mysticism and rationalism, exploitation of the poor and social reform.

The materialistic and utilitarian trend of the age led to a spectacular development of the industrial revolution which had started in the previous century. New machines, new factories and new methods turned out a huge variety of new products. People flocked from the countryside to find work in the rapidly growing factory towns. Steam trains made travel quicker and cheaper than ever. But the material progress and economic welfare were only one side of the medal; the other was represented by overcrowding, squalor, the appalling conditions of the slums, and the very hard working conditions. Social problems were inevitable, and increased with the coming to class awareness of the labourers. The growth of the newspaper industry had great relevance, because popular newspapers began to gain ground and gave more weight to popular opinion.

