



CHILTERN
OPEN AIR
MUSEUM

*Where buildings come
alive through history*

Victorian school life



Location:

- Thame Vicarage Room.

Practical Notes:

- Adult helpers will need to help young children at some points. The amount of help will be dependant on the age and ability of your group members.
- There are photo opportunities throughout this activity.

Purpose and content of the activity session:

- Your class will be called to the schoolroom by a Museum teacher using a traditional school bell and will experience an object lesson such as would have been used in the late 1800s.
- A selection of reproduction Victorian artefacts will be available for your group to draw and describe.
- Your class will also use traditional slates to practise their handwriting.

The Victorian Schoolroom – Historical Background

The start of elementary education

From the 1780s, children from poorer families started going to Sunday Schools, held on a day when the children would traditionally not be working. In these schools the children received lessons on basic literacy and numeracy as well as religious instruction. By 1851 over two million working-class children were enrolled in these schools.

Queen Victoria's reign began in 1837 and at this time there was a popular belief that the working class should be kept ignorant and illiterate, with many MPs and members of the upper classes blaming the education of the French working class for the French Revolution. During the Victorian period there were also no government benefit schemes for the unemployed and so if children attended schools they could not work to help towards the family income for food, rent and clothes. Many people of all classes also felt that 'book work' was of no use to farm labourers and factory workers.

However by the end of the 1850s, many religious groups had founded charity schools, where children could be educated for only a few pennies a week. These included the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church.

Cottage Schools

There were many cottage schools that flourished around the Chiltern Hills area during the Victorian period. These were not, in many cases, schools in the formal sense, but could be considered more as sweat-shop-cum-child-minding establishments. Accounts of children attending many of these schools have been well documented.

From the age of about four years old, children would attend a cottage school, which was usually a stuffy cottage room presided over by a 'mistress' who was often untrained and illiterate and so unable to teach reading, writing and arithmetic. For four to six year olds the school day was 9am until 1pm and 2pm until 4pm, with a minimum amount of work that needed to be done (this

depended on the craft). At seven years old the children had to return to the cottage school and continue working until 9pm or even later.

Lack of basic education

Of the cottage schools in Chesham in the mid-1860s, twenty-one were straw plait schools. At only two of these were reading, writing and arithmetic even claimed to be taught and even then they did not feature highly during these sessions.

At Aston Clinton the children attended the parish school from three to five half-days a week so that they might *'qualify for Lady de Rothschild's clothing benefit,'* while spending the remainder of the week at the cottage school.

At Chesham it was noted that *'repeated attempts have been vainly made to establish schools: parents will not send their children to places where, in lieu of gaining anything, they are obliged to pay something.'* The charges being levied at this time were 1d (½p) or 2d (1p) a week and in the early days some academic schools also charged parents for books.

A compromise was reached by the Vicar of Hawridge: *'I have now engaged a roomy cottage and a Plaiting Mistress and those parents who choose to avail themselves of it can send their children to a good plaiting school and at the same time secure for them 2 hours daily instruction from myself.'* A similar arrangement was put into practice in other Chiltern villages.

'Half-timers'

The Factory and Workshop Regulation Act of 1867 prohibited the employment of any child less than eight years old in a craft. The Act also obliged all children between the ages of eight and thirteen years old to attend an approved elementary school for a minimum of ten hours per week. These 'half-timers', as they were called, were a notoriously disruptive influence in the

school. However this Act did very little to alter cottage schools as, after all, the mistresses only supervised the children, they did not employ them and also many villages had no day schools. Evasions were widespread and many cottage schoolchildren quietly disappeared through the back door when the Inspector arrived at the front.

Compulsory education and the decline of cottage schools

The 1870 Education Act, which introduced compulsory education for all children up to ten years old, and the declining prosperity of many cottage industries finally caused the disappearance of cottage schools.

The Victorian Schoolroom

The quality of a Victorian schoolroom varied immensely from a purpose built school (many of which are still used today) to Vicarage Rooms, private cottages and disused barns. Many of the schools were also single sex, as the Victorians believed that boys and girls had totally different abilities and needs.

Parents were asked to pay between 1d (½p) and 8d (4p) and even more per week, depending on the type of school the children were attending. For the poorest, schooling was free with the workhouse providing lessons every morning in the hope that the children here would receive a better chance in life. In larger towns and cities, such as London, 'Ragged Schools' taught the children of less 'respectable' poor families. However many of these free schools did not last long due to their bad reputations.

In many schools one teacher could direct one hundred or more pupils. The teaching of the older pupils, who as monitors would then pass on their knowledge to the younger children, enabled this to happen.

School rules, punishments and rewards

Every school had a set of rules that the children had to follow both in school and throughout their daily lives. Many school rules were concerned with a child's manners and neatness and included the following:

- Behave respectfully and be lawful,
- Be kind to others and never be rude,
- Always speak the truth,
- Keep the Sabbath holy,
- Remain neat and tidy in appearance and care for all belongings.

Victorians also held the belief that it was wrong to be too kind to children, even at home, in case they took advantage and learned bad ways. Therefore discipline in the schoolroom was strict, with children punished for spelling mistakes, forgetting their timetables or untidy work as well as bad behaviour.

For poor work, children were made to stand to one side of the schoolroom wearing a 'dunce's hat', which made the child feel foolish in front of the other children.

Teachers would also have a leather strap on their desk at all times to punish offences including talking, playing, idleness, lying and deceiving, copying and being troublesome. For the more serious offences a long, springy cane was used.

However children were not always being punished, for good work they could earn points or stars and at the end of the year the hardest working children would receive certificates or a school prize (usually a book). For those children who never missed school and achieved good results a medal might have been presented.

The school day

The school day lasted six hours with the morning session generally running from 9am until 12pm and the afternoon session commencing at 2pm and finishing at 5pm, although in the winter months some schools finished an hour early as many children had to walk several miles home. The two-hour lunch break enabled children to go home for lunch.

Lessons lasted approximately twenty to thirty minutes with a traditional school day in the 1890s including morning prayers, scriptures, writing and dictation, arithmetic, geography, object lesson, composition and afternoon prayers with fifteen minutes for recreation in the morning and afternoon. Some schools also included domestic subjects such as needlework and washing for girls and woodworking for boys.

The Revised Code

In 1862 a Revised Code was introduced outlining the curricula to be followed, much like the way the government introduced the National Curriculum in the 1990s. The Code only included the three R's (Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic) and followed six standards. The code was revised in 1879 and again in 1890.

	Standard I	Standard II.	Standard III.	Standard IV.	Standard V.	Standard VI.
Reading*	To read a short paragraph from a book, not confined to words of one syllable.	To read with intelligence a short paragraph from an elementary reading book.	To read with intelligence a short paragraph from a more advanced reading book.	To read with intelligence a few lines of prose or poetry selected by the inspector.	Improved reading.	Reading with fluency and expression
Writing	Copy in manuscript character a line of print, on slates or in copy books, at choice of managers; and write from dictation a few common words.	A sentence from the same book, slowly read once, and then dictated. Copy books (large or half-text) to be shown.	A sentence slowly dictated once from the same book. Copy books to be shown (small hand, capital letters and figures).	Eight lines slowly dictated once from a reading book. Copy books to be shown (improved small hand).	Writing from memory the substance of a short story read out twice; spelling, grammar, and handwriting to be considered.	A short theme or letter; the composition, spelling, grammar, and handwriting to be considered.
Arithmetic†	Notation and numeration up to 1,000. Simple addition and subtraction of numbers of not more than four figures, and the multiplication table, to 6 times 12.	Notation and numeration up to 100,000. The four simple rules to short division (inclusive).	Notation and numeration up to 1,000,000. Long division and compound addition and subtraction (money).	Compound rules (money) and reduction (common weights and measures).+	Practice, bills of parcels, and simple proportion.	Proportion, vulgar and decimal fractions.

Notes:

- * 'Reading will be tested in the ordinary class books, if approved by the Inspector; but these books must be of reasonable length and difficulty and unmarked. . .'
- † 'The work of girls will be judged more leniently than that of boys. . .'
- + 'The "weights and measures" taught in public elementary schools should be only such as are really useful; - such as Avoirdupois Weight, Long Measure, Liquid Measure, Time Table, Square and Cubical Measure, and any measure which is connected with the industrial occupations of the district.'

The New Code of 1879.

The average age for each standard was:

Standard I	6 years	Standard IV	9 years
Standard II	7 years	Standard V	10 years
Standard III	8 years	Standard VI	11 years

However progression through the Standards was by examination and not age. If a child failed the examination then the whole year was repeated, with many children being in the same groups as much younger children.

The Object Lesson

Although many of the lessons followed the same pattern of rote learning and repetition, children were given the chance to experience and learn by using their personal observations and their senses through an object lesson on 'Common Things' and 'Elements of Science'. Teachers were encouraged to keep three points in view when preparing these lessons:

1. The production of full and accurate information,
2. The arrangement of the matter in its teaching order,
3. The indication of the method by which the ideas are to be worked out.

In the selection of objects to be used, preferences were to be given to items that were likely to come to the children's notice in their daily life stating that, *'the study of which will help to cultivate observation and intelligent inquiry; the habits which will tend to make the individual exact [in] his statements, correct in his judgements, and useful in his future avocations.'*

The object lesson was split into four subjects:

I	Common things	E.g. table, hair-brush, window
II	Food substances	E.g. tea, sugar, olive oil, water
III	Clothing materials	E.g. linen and flax, wool and woollen cloth

IV	Animal and vegetable substances used in Manufactures and Domestic Life	E.g. candles, horn, paper
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In a popular training manual of the time, 'Common School Education' by James Currie a description of this object lesson was made as follows:

"The object should be exhibited, if it be a substance (such as glass or sugar), for the inspection of the class; and the qualities important to be noticed should be observed by the appropriate senses. The action of the several senses is not to be interchanged, thus a quality cognisable by touch alone, such as hardness, is not to be vouched for by the sight, but verified by the sense of touch ...".

The Victorian Schoolroom at Christmas time

All Victorian schools taught the scripture and this was especially important at Christmas time, when all children would be expected to learn the Christmas story and read passages from the Bible.

It was also customary for school children to write 'Christmas pieces' lettered on coloured paper in the child's finest copperplate script. These 'Christmas pieces' allowed the children to both send seasons greetings to their parents and show their progress within the schoolroom. They were also the pre-cursor to the now popular Christmas card, which was invented in 1843.

Suggested follow-up classroom activities

Literacy

Victorian schoolrooms concentrated on neatness of both a child's appearance and work.

During literacy hour a short poem could be learnt and copied using their best handwriting. Examples of short poems are below:

Key Stage 1 poems

Farmer, who has stolen my corn?

Rat, Squeak! Squeak!

Did anyone speak?

Key Stage 2 poems

Go, idle boy, and earn your daily bread

Work honestly for that with which you are fed.

The School Log Book

Introduction

All schools have a log book, which tells you who was absent and for what reasons, what punishments were used and why and what the lessons were. This is a great primary resource and can be used in different ways.

Looking at primary sources

Photocopy a page from the log book, possibly the same date (e.g. 15th September) as your lesson or a particular season.

Prepare some questions to use with your class, for example if you are looking at harvest time why were many of the boys absent from school?

A basis for role play or lesson planning

Look through the log book and choose a lesson which you could 'bring to life' for your class. This could be hand writing practise, choosing a short composition to read or an object lesson.

You could plan a Victorian day, where the children come to school in costume and re-enact the lessons as they would have been held.

Object Lessons

Use an object lesson during science and technology or history lessons, many object lessons during Victorian times looked at clouds, materials such as glass and metal amongst other items.

History

Use old objects within the classroom, remind children that the objects are old and can not easily be replaced. You could look at everyday objects, for example irons or old toys and compare them to their modern equivalent.

Science

During the object lessons children have to use all of their senses, each sense could be concentrated upon each lesson.

One recommended Victorian object lesson was to look at the inner workings of a clock, a modern equivalent would be to look at a digital watch.

Materials can also be looked at using objects - what are they made of? are they soft or hard? Compare contemporary items to originals, for example wooden toys now made from plastic.

Access Statement:

Thame Vicarage Room: Fully Accessible to all users.

Victorian Schoolroom: This activity provides a hands-on experience for all children and can be adapted to all needs.