

Introduction

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During the Summer term 2004, children from St. Mary and St. Paul's Primary School, Prescott were awarded a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. This enabled them to work together with professional actors and Prescott Museum to produce a short film documenting watchmaking in Victorian Prescott.

The children from year 5 learnt what life was like in Victorian Britain, specifically the social and economic factors affecting Prescott at the time. The main industry in Prescott during the late 19th Century was watchmaking, this fell into decline as prices were undercut by cheap American and Swiss imports. The Lancashire Watch Company was set up in 1889 to revive the business in the town. The class explored life through the eyes of a working class child, looking at job options, leisure pursuits and domestic conditions.

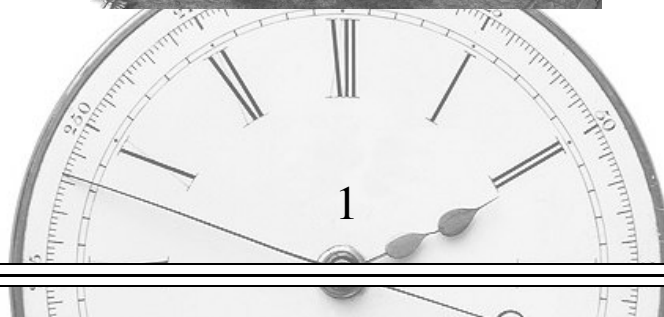
The children and the team of actors, researchers, teachers, film crew and museum staff then brought history to life. Scripts were written, costumes were hired, film locations were negotiated and the children performed their knowledge of the Victorian era.

The film is a fantastic visual document that brings together Victorian life in Prescott and the Lancashire Watch Company.

To support the video a national curriculum pack, web site, leaflet and touring exhibition have been created for everyone to learn more about the project.

"We all went to Croxteth Hall to make a film and we dressed in Victorian costumes."

"When I was in the film I learnt that you have to be very careful and very patient."



Overview of the Victorian Age

The Victorian era began in 1837 after the death of King William IV, when the crown was passed to his niece Victoria, the eighteen-year-old daughter of the Duke of Kent, in the absence of a male heir. The young Queen Victoria married her German cousin, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg, Gotha in 1840 and bore nine children during the marriage, which ended with Albert's untimely death in 1861.

Over the centuries and through many wars, Britain had claimed large areas of land overseas, which became known as The British Empire. This additional land gave Britain power, status, wealth and trade links across the globe. It was said that 'the sun never sets on the British Empire' - as it covered so much of the Earth's surface it was always daytime in a part of it. In 1876, Queen Victoria gave herself the title "Empress of India" after it was suggested to her by Benjamin Disraeli, the Conservative Prime Minister at the time.

The rigid class system that divided the country into upper and working class, rich and poor respectively, had begun to loosen, and the successful working class industrialists, merchants and professionals developed a new "middle class". Many grand new houses were built to accommodate them, resulting in the creation of suburban areas, close enough to cities for the businessmen who worked there. The aspirations of the middle classes meant that they decorated their homes and wore clothing in as close a style to that of the upper classes as was possible. Domestic servants were even kept in many middle class homes, although far less than the upper class employed; the staff of stately homes often outnumbered the members of the family.

The working class city housing boom, begun in the late eighteenth century to meet the demand of housing for the workers who had left the countryside to find work, continued throughout the nineteenth century. This resulted in cramped squalid conditions, particularly in the large cities; back-to-back slum housing in blocks with central courtyards and shared privies, often with only one water supply for a whole street. It was widely believed that individuals "deserved" their social standing, and so therefore the poor were poor because they should be, and were not to be pitied. The government tried to solve the problem by building *workhouses* to provide shelter for the impoverished and needy. This was only meant as a last resort – conditions there were deliberately harsh to discourage people seeking an easy option.



The upper class continued to prosper, and the aspirational tone of the era meant wealthy women wore ever more flamboyant costume, requiring many changes of clothing throughout the course of the day to suit different activities and occasions. Wide hooped undergarments, crinolines, tightly laced corsetry, and padded bustles to enhance the rump all provided the foundations for the clothing. This gave an ultra-feminine “hourglass” effect with a tiny nipped-in waist. Respectable men wore suits and hats at all times, but with different cuts and fabrics for different occasions.

The poor, however, bought mostly second hand clothing and had very few articles to wear. Shirts, trousers and flat caps were regular for working class men, and the women wore blouses, long skirts and shawls.

It was a great time of innovation, following the mechanisation and development of the country during the period known as the *industrial revolution*. Mass production, steam power, and the iron casting process meant that many technological advances were made. Important British figures such as Brunel and Stephenson made an incredible impact with their designs, which are still in use worldwide today. Communications improved as the railways expanded, the telephone was invented, as was the telegraph. Electricity was harnessed to provide an alternate power source for the country, although only the wealthy could afford to have their houses wired. Trams provided a new form of transport, first pulled by steam engines and then powered by electricity. Goods were mostly transported by rail, canal, and distributed by horse and cart. Bicycles were developed, and owned by the well off. Women even took to riding bicycles and so loose breeches became an acceptable form of attire for them, but only during said activity.

The country exported goods and ideas across the globe. The supremacy of British design and technology was showcased in Brighton at the Great Exhibition of 1851. A huge steel and glass building, *Crystal Palace*, was constructed to house the exhibits, examples of the work of Britain’s finest craftsmen. One area of craftsmanship that Britain excelled in was watchmaking, particularly in the northwest. At the height of its industrial success, Britain was known as “*the workshop of the world*”. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, other countries took on and developed British methods of production, and imported cheap foreign goods meant that industry sank into decline.

Queen Victoria died in January 1901, having reigned for sixty-four years, the longest period of any British monarch.



