

# What the Victorians *didn't* do for us

A collection of their useless advice



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A collection of their useless advice



Beatrice Hemsworth



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## WHAT THE VICTORIANS DIDN'T DO FOR US

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# Introduction

Nobody can deny that the Victorians did a lot for us. But they occasionally blundered in the midst of all the industrial advances and incredible discoveries. History has largely overlooked these errors in judgement and relegated them to their grubby place firmly under the carpet. We've gathered together these dusty facts so that you can appreciate the enormous diversity of Victorian society, from their habit of clinging to bizarre medical practices to their preposterous – and sometimes deadly – beliefs.

Queen Victoria reigned in Britain from 1837 to 1901 and passed many misguided beliefs onto her subjects. Her reign was not a smooth one, however. She survived seven assassination attempts, three of which took place in 1842. Nevertheless she managed to lead her subjects in a merry, albeit remarkably strange, dance of morality, innovation and contradictions. Some of the revelations within this book will make you smile, some will make you cringe; but we believe that all should be remembered.

# Values in Society



## **All Hail the Queen!**

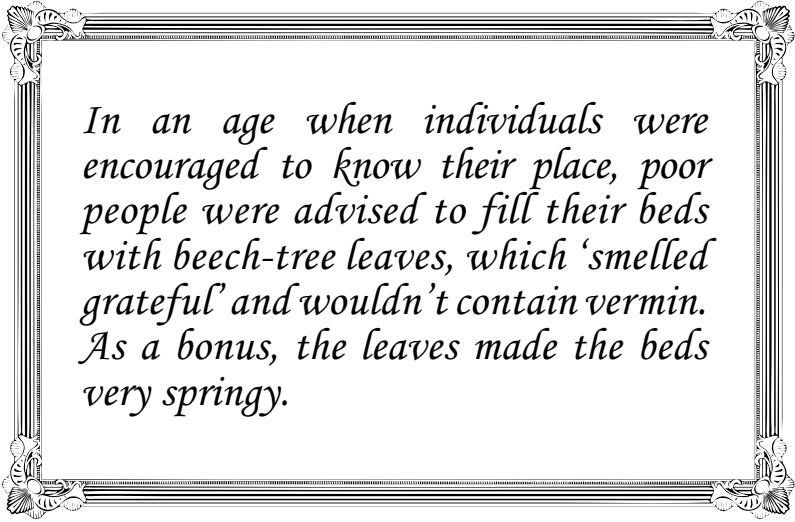
Despite being a woman in a position of considerable power, Queen Victoria didn't have much faith in women's ability to think for themselves. When the campaign for women's suffrage began in 1865, she claimed that the thought of allowing women to vote was a 'mad, wicked folly'. She declared that feminists should be whipped and that women would 'surely perish without male protection'.

She also hated politics, a subject that became taboo among respectable Victorian ladies. At one point she announced to her daughter, Vicky: 'I am sick of all this horrid business – of politics and Europe in general, and think you will hear some day of my going with the children to live in Australia, and to think of Europe as of the moon.'

She had an unusual fear of bishops too. Her 'bishopophobia' is thought to have begun in her childhood when she developed a fear of their wigs.

## Home is Where the Heart Is

The Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries changed the face of England. Cities became huge, ugly, overpopulated metropolises where crime and disease were rampant. Machines replaced those employed in country areas and these people flooded into cities in search of work. To accommodate the new urbanites, housing was built quickly and cheaply without care for human needs: rooms were cramped and often housed entire families; indoor plumbing and clean, running water were unheard of; and very few houses had windows, never mind gardens. These slums were dirty, unhygienic places that bore little resemblance to the comfortable houses of the affluent upper classes.



*In an age when individuals were encouraged to know their place, poor people were advised to fill their beds with beech-tree leaves, which 'smelled grateful' and wouldn't contain vermin. As a bonus, the leaves made the beds very springy.*

## From Rags to More Rags

The population increased dramatically during the Victorian era but this meant that thousands suffered under the burden of poverty. The typical Victorian attitude was to ignore the affected masses in the hope that they would somehow disappear. The upper classes, in particular, had no sympathy for the poverty-stricken and claimed that most people were poor because they wasted their money on alcohol and gambling.



Mrs Cecil Francis Alexander included this verse in her uplifting hymn ‘Maker of Heaven and Earth’ (better known as ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’):

*The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them, high or lowly,  
And ordered their estate.*

This verse is usually omitted today but summed up the Victorian disposition perfectly. They firmly believed that each person had their place in life and wouldn’t have dreamed of interfering with God’s plan. It’s not surprising that this point of view was upheld more by the comfortable upper classes than the starving lower classes.

## Elegant Elocution

Only the Queen's English was acceptable, and speaking in a regional dialect or a different accent was frowned upon. Those with different – or, as the Victorians saw it, wrong – accents were pitied and encouraged to change their intonation for a more appropriate one. One expert on the English language, Mrs Mortimer – author of *The Clumsiest People in Europe* – noted that the Scottish accent was very broad:

*One day a traveller said to a Scotchman, 'Does it always rain, as it does now?'*

*'No,' replied the man, 'it snaws sometimes.'*

*He said 'snaws', instead of 'snows', for the poor Scotch speak their words very broad.*

## An English City Garden

The Victorian era was one of increasing levels of pollution and sprawling city slums as a result of the Industrial Revolution and the fast expanding population. However, it also witnessed a growing interest in the more eye-pleasing hobby of gardening, and during the nineteenth century local governments created myriad city parks and municipal gardens. Yet their efforts were less an attempt to spruce up the suburbs and more a bid to crack down on antisocial behaviour; these green areas, it was said, would encourage a peaceful disposition and discourage drunkenness, especially among the poor.



## Educating Victorians

While education has always been a subject for debate, the Victorians' main worry was not about raising educational standards. Instead, many expressed their concerns about the very idea of educating poor, working-class children, as it was feared that teaching them to read and write would lead them to disagree with their 'elders and betters'.



Life for those who were educated was not always a bed of roses, however. Those children who didn't behave exactly as they should suffered cruel and unusual punishments devised by the powers-that-be. The following are just a few examples:

**The log** – Unruly students were forced to sit with a log strapped to their shoulders.

**Pillory and stocks** – Children's heads and wrists were strapped into the holes of the wooden plank or pillory while their ankles were bound in the stocks. Naturally this was quite an ordeal for the child, causing considerable discomfort and and fear.

**The cage** – Very naughty children were placed in a basket which was then hung from the ceiling. Victorian schoolteachers no doubt took their cue from the gibbet, a device used to display criminals' bodies and deter other wrongdoers.