

Thorner Historical Society - Christmas 2017

Victorian Christmas and its influence on British Life

Those of you who attended our recent speaker talk in Victory Hall about Dickens' life and times may well appreciate the contrast in people's lives. Below are a few dates and notes, which will hopefully illuminate the differences and show the parallel lives people lived.

Dickens:	Born 1812
Victoria:	Born 1819
Workhouse:	1834 – Poor relief in Workhouses only
Victoria:	Crowned Queen in 1837
Dickens:	A Christmas Carol 1843 published
Dr Barnardo:	Born 1845
Christmas Tree:	1840's – Implemented at Windsor by Prince Albert
Dr Barnardo:	1868 – Led the way in setting up decent Children's Homes
Dickens:	Died 1870
Victoria:	Died 1901
Dr Barnardo:	Died 1905

What Christmas?

Before the beginning of Victoria's reign in 1837 Christmas across Britain was unheard of. The industrial revolution's impact on society and the introduction of wealth and technologies brought about great change. Famous novels including Charles Dickens' critically acclaimed 'A Christmas Carol' put pressure on the rich to distribute wealth and lifestyle happiness.

The Introduction of Christmas Holidays:

Introduction of the holiday season was one of the most significant cultural shifts in the Victorian era. With the wealth and infrastructure delivered by the industrial revolution the middle class were allowed to take Christmas day and Boxing Day off work. Those who had moved into the city for work were allowed to return to the country for the Christmas causing a significant shift in family, tradition and work life balance.

Boxing Day

The name Boxing Day originated from the Victorian era. This was the name given for when the servants and working class individuals opened their 'boxes' of gifts, which they had collected from the rich and middle class.



The Giving Of Gifts:

Giving and receiving gifts became prominent within the Victoria era. The exchanging of presents is of ancient origin. However, at the beginning of the Victorian times this was done to celebrate the New Year. This was moved to Christmas day as the significance of this began to grow.

The Victorian era was seen as a time to reward Children with gifts; a celebration, and one, which was embraced, by rich and poor alike. The poor however would focus on stockings commonly filled with fruit and nuts, a tradition we still adopted today.

With industry came the factories and in turn industrialisation and mass production.

The Christmas Tree:

The popularity of the Christmas tree throughout the Victorian era is usually put down to

Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert (German by birth and upbringing). He brought one to Windsor Castle in the 1840's. This tradition is probably one of the most significant ones of modern day Christmas as it was also in his country of birth.

The Christmas Card:

In 1843 the first Christmas card was made. Sir Henry Cole asked an artist to create a Christmas card of which he printed 1000 for sale in his art shop in London. This initial idea seemed to work as the wealthy families began sending out their own cards every Christmas.

Queen Victoria was a huge fan of the Christmas card and began to have her own children creating and sending their own Christmas cards throughout the period. The popularity of sending cards was helped along when in 1870 a halfpenny postage rate was introduced. This led to over 11 million cards printed by 1880. This became an ongoing national tradition.

The Victorians' impact on how we celebrate Christmas is fascinating to say the least. No era influenced the way we celebrate Christmas as the Victorian era did. Between Dickens and Prince Albert a whole Xmas industry seems to have built up. All the same Poverty was rife and recorded by Dickens in his stories. Workhouses were set up as noted below but were barely a palliative rather than a solution.

The Workhouse

Before 1834, money collected from landowners and other wealthy people was used to buy food and clothing for poor people. The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 ensured that no able-bodied person could get poor relief unless they went to live in special workhouses. The idea was that the poor were helped to support themselves. They had to work for their food and accommodation.



Workhouses were where poor people who had no job or home lived. They earned their keep by doing jobs in the workhouse. Also in the workhouses were orphaned and abandoned children, the physically and mentally sick, the disabled, the elderly and unmarried mothers. Workhouses were often very large and were feared by the poor and old. The free education and job training children received did not include the two most important skills of all: reading and writing, which were needed to get a good job. Workhouses provided almost everything that was needed on site but the food was tasteless, basic and repetitive.

Typical Daily Menu

Breakfast:	6 oz. bread, 1½ oz. cheese.
Dinner:	1½ pints soup.
Supper:	6 oz. bread, 2 oz. cheese



The government, terrified of encouraging 'idlers' made sure that people feared the workhouse and would do anything to keep out of it. Women, children and men had different living and working areas in the workhouse, so families were split up. To make things even worse they could be punished if they even tried to speak to one another! The poor were made to wear a uniform. This meant that everyone looked the same and everyone outside knew they were poor and lived in the workhouse. Upon entering the workhouse, the poor were stripped and bathed (under supervision). The young and old as well as men and women were made to work hard, often doing unpleasant jobs. Children could also find themselves 'hired out' (sold) to work in factories or mines.

Dr Thomas Barnardo and orphaned Children.

Dr Thomas Barnardo felt that workhouses were the wrong places for children and so from 1868 onwards (22yrs after Dickens' A Christmas Carol) he led the way in setting up proper children's homes. By the time he died in 1905, the charity he founded had opened 96 homes caring for more than 8,500 children.

Dickens' Potted History

Infancy in Portsmouth and London (1812-17)

Born on 7th February 1812 at a house in Portsmouth. His father, John Dickens, worked as a clerk in the pay office of the Royal Dockyard. Family moved to London in 1815 when John was posted there.

Happy boyhood in Kent (1817-22)

Father posted first to Sheerness, then to Chatham Royal Dockyard, Kent. Pleasant, formative boyhood years for Charles. His experiences in Chatham and neighbouring Rochester inspired much of his adult work.

London, Prison and the Blacking Factory (1822-27)

His schooling was interrupted when he followed the family to London, his father having been recalled there. Put to work in late 1823 at a blacking factory, and his father imprisoned for debt in early 1824. These humiliations provided a mainspring for his subsequent ambition. Left factory in 1823/4, for his final two years of schooling.

Established in journalism (1829-33)

Started as a freelance reporter of law cases. Admitted as reader at the British Museum Library in 1830. Became a parliamentary reporter in 1831.

Success as a short story writer (1833-36)

First short story published in 1833. Continued his success as a reporter, joining the *The Morning Chronicle* in 1834. Married in 1836.

Loss of touch and spectacular recovery (1840-43)

After completing *The Old Curiosity Shop* and the much less popular *Barnaby Rudge* in 1841, set off to visit the United States during the first half of 1842. On his return, wrote *American Notes for General Circulation*, which was received badly in the USA and lukewarmly in the UK. *Martin Chuzzlewit*, begun at the end of 1842, was not immediately popular. Reputation re-established with publication of first Christmas story, *A Christmas Carol*.

Popularity of *A Christmas Carol*:

A Christmas Carol was the most successful book of the 1843 holiday season. By Christmas it sold six thousand copies and it continued to be popular into the New Year. Eight stage adaptations were in production within two months of the book's publication.

Maturing as a successful author (1843-50)

Christmas stories, minor works, visits to France and Italy, amateur dramatics and other activities assumed greater importance, but two major works completed. *Dombey and Son*, begun in 1846, and *David Copperfield*, begun in 1849, were more serious and more carefully thought out than previous novels.

Established as publisher/editor/author (1850-58)

Became joint owner and editor of a new weekly journal, *Household Words*, in 1850. Contributed three major works during this period: *Bleak House*, *Hard Times* and *Little Dorrit*. Purchased Gad's Hill Place in 1856. Separated from his wife in 1858.

A new role and a new journal (1858-67)

Gave first public readings of his works in 1858. Established in 1859 a new weekly journal, *All The Year Round*, which replaced *Household Words*. Serialisation of *A Tale of Two Cities* began with first number. Contributed two other major works during this period: *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*. Readings assumed greater importance. Involved in major rail accident, 1865. Last Christmas story published in 1867.

Died of a stroke in 1870

