

Victorian School Life

Life in a Victorian school was very different from today. There were no laptops, tablets or interactive whiteboards – and punishments could be very harsh.

School

At the start of the 1800s, only some children went to school. Boys from rich families were educated in private schools, while girls were often taught at home by their governess. Some charities and churches provided free schools for poor children but the classrooms were often overcrowded, sometimes with more than 100 pupils.

In 1880, a law was passed saying that every child between the ages of five and ten had to go to school.

Lessons

Victorian teachers were very strict. Pupils called male teachers, 'Sir' and female teachers, 'Madam' or 'Miss'. A lot of the lessons involved listening to the teacher and copying things down from the blackboard.

The three **Rs**: reading, writing and arithmetic were very important. Instead of learning in a fun way – like multiplication bingo or online games – children often had to memorise things. They would chant the times tables, for example, until they knew them off by heart.

Days were long and usually lasted until 5:00 pm. Here is an example of a Victorian school day:

Time	Lesson
9:00 - 9:10	prayers
9:10 - 10:10	scripture (Bible work)
10:10 - 11:10	arithmetic (maths)
11:10 - 11:30	recreation (play time)
11:30 - 12:00	writing
12:00 - 2:00	lunch
2:00 - 2:45	drill (PE)
2:45 - 3:30	woodwork (boys) cookery and embroidery (girls)
3:30 - 4:20	science
4:20 - 4:50	reading
4:50 - 5:00	prayers

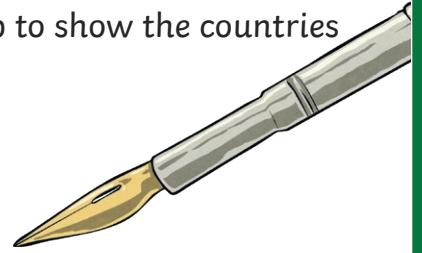
Equipment

When writing, pupils often scratched letters onto slates (flat rocks) with something sharp. It was a bit like a whiteboard as the slates could be wiped clean and used again. Older children may have been given a fountain pen to write in 'copybooks'. The pen was dipped into a little pot of ink on the table. The inkwells were refilled each morning.

Victorian classrooms had tall ceilings with windows high up so children couldn't look outside. This was so they could concentrate on their work. The classrooms usually had an **abacus** to help with arithmetic and a map to show the countries of the British Empire.

Punishment

Here's what might happen if you did something wrong in a Victorian school:



Action	Possible Punishment
rudeness, laziness, telling lies, skipping school	the cane (This is a stick that the teacher would hit the pupils with; boys usually on their bottoms and girls on their legs or hands.)
not understanding the work or not keeping up with lessons	dunce's hat (The teacher made the pupil wear a hat with the word 'dunce', meaning stupid, on it. The dunce was told to go and stand in the corner of the room.)

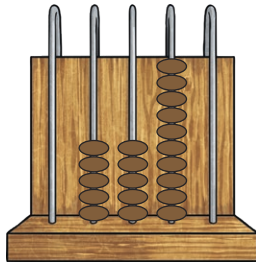


Other Punishments

Children might have to do 'lines' where they copied the same sentence over and over again (perhaps 100 times). In some schools, if a pupil was really naughty, they would be beaten with a leather strap, or perhaps hung from the ceiling in a wicker basket using ropes and pulleys.

Would you like to have gone to school in Victorian times?

Glossary



abacus

a wire frame with beads to help with counting



embroidery

sewing and needlework



governess

a woman who teaches children in their home

Questions

1. What is a **governess** and what did they do in the 1800s?

2. What happened in 1880? Explain why this was a good thing.

3. Tick the **three** Rs.

- ☐ reading
- ☐ religious studies (scripture)
- ☐ writing
- ☐ arithmetic

4. Do you think religion was important in Victorian schools? Explain your answer.

5. Why was slate useful in the Victorian classroom?

6. What might happen if a pupil was **really** naughty?

7. Why don't you think schools use dunce's hats anymore?

8. Link these actions with the correct punishment, according to the text.

inkwell

scripture

abacus

writing

Bible

arithmetic

Answers

- What is a **governess** and what did they do in the 1800s?
A governess is woman who teaches children in their home. In the 1800s a lot of them taught girls from rich families.
- What happened in 1880? Explain why this was a good thing.
In 1880, a law was passed saying that every child between the ages of five and ten had to go to school. This was good because it gave every child the chance of a school education, not just boys from rich families.
- Tick the **three** Rs.
☒ **reading**
☐ religious studies (scripture)
☒ **writing**
☒ **arithmetic**
- Do you think religion was important in Victorian schools? Explain your answer.
Pupils' own responses (with a 'yes'), such as: Yes, I think religion was very important in Victorian schools. If you look at the example of a Victorian school day, it starts off with prayers, then scripture (which is Bible work), then they have prayers again at the end of the day. This shows me religion was very important.
- Why was slate useful in the Victorian classroom?
Slate was useful because the children could write on it and then wipe the words away like a whiteboard.
- What might happen if a pupil was **really** naughty?
If a pupil was really naughty, they might be beaten with a leather strap or hung from the ceiling in a wicker basket.
- Why don't you think schools use dunce's hats anymore?
Pupils' own responses, such as: I don't think schools use dunce's hats anymore because it is cruel to the child who has to wear it. It might not be their fault that they don't understand something and to make them wear a 'stupid' hat wouldn't be fair.
- Link these actions with the correct punishment, according to the text.

