

Great Britain—The Victorian Era (1837-1901)

The Height of England's Greatness

When King William IV of Britain died in 1837, the British crown passed on to his niece, Victoria. Queen Victoria ruled Great Britain from 1837 to 1901, the longest reign in British history. Victoria represented the values of her era. Victorian ideals included duty, honesty, respectability, hard work, and a strict moral code of conduct. During Victoria's reign, Britain reached the height of its greatness. The Victorian **Era** in Britain was also characterized by the following.

- political **reform** and stability
- general peace and **expansion** abroad
- a strong and growing economy
- social reform
- a growing feeling among many of the British that the world was a safer place in which to live

Queen Victoria (1819-1901)

Victoria became queen in 1837 when her uncle William IV died. She was 18 years old. Within three years, Queen Victoria met and fell in love with her first cousin Prince Albert. Queen Victoria decided that as queen, it was her right to propose to Albert, and they married in 1840. They had a happy marriage and eventually had nine children. They devoted much of their time to their children, which made their family life an example to all of England. Victoria arranged each of her children's marriages. Her oldest daughter became the empress of Germany and was the mother of William II. As the children grew up and had children of their own, Victoria became known as the "grandmother of Europe."

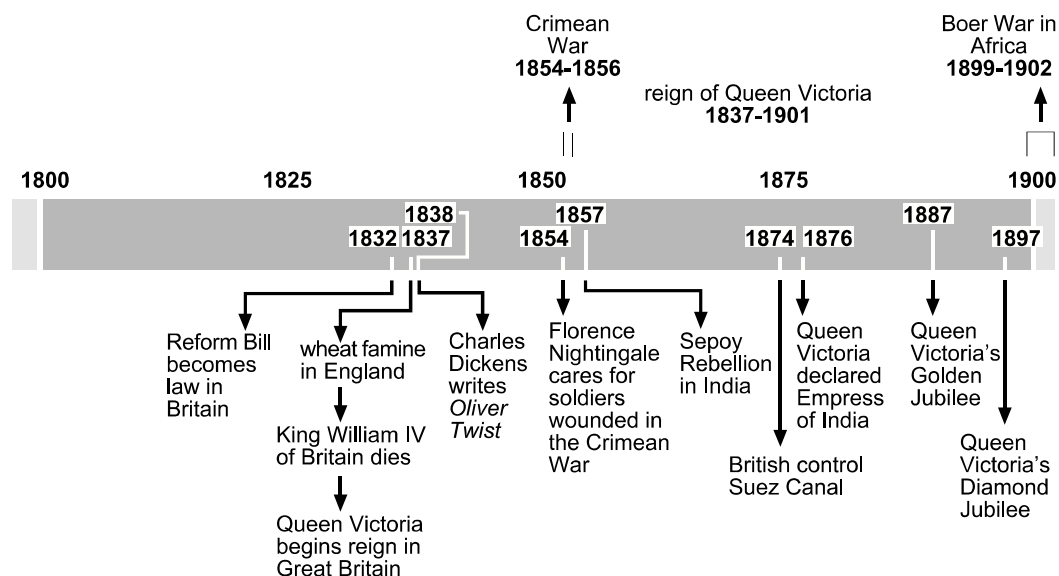


Political Reforms

Britain, unlike the other European countries, did not suffer during the revolutions of 1848. Because the British government listened to some of its citizens' demands and passed reforms, the British people did not revolt. Furthermore, the English middle class gained political power through democratic means.

Until the 1860s, Britain's king or queen formed its government. During the 1860s, however, Queen Victoria shifted political power to the political party with the most representatives in the House of Commons. Britain's House of Commons passed all the nation's laws. As a result, both the Liberal and the Conservative political parties realized that to become the majority party, they would have to gain the support of the majority of voters. These voters now included both the middle and lower classes. Only by passing reforms benefiting the most people could either party gain a majority in the House of Commons. This turned out to be especially good for the working class because reforms were passed that increased their rights. The most important reform was the Second Reform Bill, passed in 1867. This law doubled the number of eligible voters. It gave the right to vote to most men working in cities, whether they owned property or not.

Timeline of the Victorian Era



Foreign Affairs

During the Victorian Era, Britain was involved in the *Crimean War* and the *Boer War*. The Crimean War was fought from 1854 to 1856 in the Crimea, in what is now the Ukraine. In this war, Britain joined France and Turkey against the Russians. The British became involved in the Crimean War because they opposed the Russians in their ambitions to control the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans and the Straits (the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus), a water route connecting the Black Sea and Mediterranean Sea. Great Britain feared that its route to India would be cut off if Russia controlled this region. The Russian Empire would become too powerful if it were able to control this area of the Mediterranean. British generals and soldiers, however, were not prepared to fight.

In one battle, 673 soldiers of Britain's Light Brigade (a well-respected English force) attacked the Russians. Only 195 British soldiers survived. Disease and infection also took its toll on the French and British troops. A heroic British army nurse, Florence Nightingale, reduced the death rate by enforcing sanitary regulations and high professional standards in caring for the sick. When Austria threatened to attack Russia, Russia agreed to peace, and in 1856 a peace treaty was signed. Russia agreed to withdraw all claims to Balkan territory.

Florence Nightingale

Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) is the English founder of modern nursing. She is known as the "Lady with the Lamp" because she worked night and day during the Crimean War. In 1840 she traveled in Europe studying methods of nursing, and in 1854 the British government asked her to tend the wounded soldiers of the Crimean War. Along with 38 nurses, she sailed to Scutari and established sanitary methods and discipline in the two army hospitals. Nightingale reduced the death rate by enforcing sanitary regulations and high professional standards in caring for the sick and wounded. She set up a nurses' training school in London in 1860.



The charge of Britain's Light Brigade took place on October 25, 1854. Following is the poem "Charge of the Light Brigade" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson which first appeared on December 9, 1854. The poem was written to memorialize the British brigade of 673 soldiers who charged the Russian army against hopeless odds.

The Charge of the Light Brigade

by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
'Forward, the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!' he said:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

'Forward, the Light Brigade!'
Was there a man dismay'd?
Not tho' the soldier knew
Some one had blunder'd:
Theirs not to make reply;
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell
Rode the six hundred.

Flash'd all their sabres bare,
Flash'd as they turn'd in air
Sabring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
All the world wonder'd:
Plunged in the battery-smoke
Right thro' the line they broke;
Cossack and Russian

Reel'd from the sabre-stroke
Shatter'd and sunder'd.
Then they rode back, but not
Not the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in behind them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell,
They that had fought so well
Came thro' the jaws of Death,
Back from the mouth of Hell,
All that was left of them,
Left of six hundred.

When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
All the world wonder'd.
Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred!

Boer War (1899-1902)

The Dutch Boers (farmers) in the Cape Colony of South Africa were unhappy under British rule. They moved northward and established two independent republics—the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. War broke out between the Boers and the British when diamond and gold deposits were discovered in the Boer republics. The war ended in 1902 when the British defeated the Boers and annexed their territories. The Transvaal and Orange Free State became British colonies.

Britain's foreign policy was successful during the Victorian Era. Great Britain became the greatest **imperial** power in the world. The expansion of the British Empire in Asia included India, parts of China, and Indonesia. On the African continent the empire extended to Egypt, the Sudan in North Africa, South Africa, and West Africa. The West Indies, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand also became colonies of the British Empire. By the end of Victoria's reign, Great Britain controlled much of the world's trade.

These new colonies provided British factories with cheap raw materials. After the raw materials were made into finished products, they were sold back to the colonies. Thus, Britain had ready **markets** in the colonies. You can see that Great Britain's **prosperous** economy was due directly to the size of its empire.

Growth of Industry: The Rise of the Working Class and the Middle Class

As Great Britain's economy grew, two new classes of people **emerged**: the *working class* and the middle class. Lower on the economic ladder than the



a well-dressed woman of the Victorian Era

middle class, the working class was sizable. It included men, women, and children who worked long hours, six days a week, in factories or coal mines. The working conditions were, at best, horrible. Workers' wages were very low. Furthermore, the workers' life **expectancy** was very short as compared to that of the **industrialists** and landowners.

The middle class included a small group of wealthy *industrialists*—who owned and ran the factories—bankers, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals. The middle class lived comfortably, often owned property, and were well

educated. Whereas the working class often lived in slums, the middle class lived in spacious houses in well kept neighborhoods.



interior of a Victorian home

Because many of Britain's working class gained representation in Parliament (the House of Commons), their working conditions and lifestyles slowly improved. In fact, some working-class people began rising to the middle class.

Economic and Social Reforms

Queen Victorian made **moral** conduct and **values** important to the people of the Victorian Era. The middle class especially set up a strict social and economic code of moral conduct. It became very important to be respectable, to conduct oneself according to society's code.

Social values and the interest in social reforms became a common theme in books written during the Victorian Era. The most famous writer of the time was Charles Dickens. Dickens' books were about the people, their jobs, the way they thought, and the ways they acted towards each other. Literature such as Dickens' helped make people aware of the need for reforms benefiting the masses during the Victorian Age.

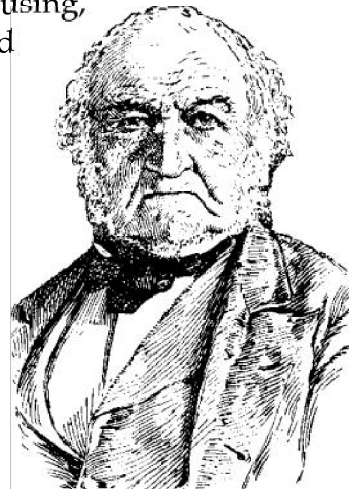
Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

Charles Dickens was the second of eight children. His family was unable to live on their income, so they drifted from one poor, shabby home in London to another. His father eventually went to prison for debt and took Charles, the younger children, and Charles' mother with him to prison. They had to stay in prison for three months, but these experiences influenced Charles Dickens and his writings. He created many comic characters based on his own early experiences. His works include *The Pickwick Papers*, *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Great Expectations*.



During Queen Victoria's reign, Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone both served as the prime ministers of England. Between 1868 and 1880, they sponsored laws which made Great Britain more democratic and improved the quality of life for the middle and working classes. Changes including a public health bill, a bill to improve housing, land reform, and state-run education were enacted by the British Parliament. Also enacted were laws that recognized trade unions, limited child labor, and protected the rights of workers.

Victoria was queen of Great Britain for most of the 19th century. This century saw more changes than any previous period in history. The queen became a symbol of peace and prosperity. The British Empire expanded, trade and industry grew, and social and economic reforms were enacted.



William Gladstone

Review

During the Victorian Era, political and social reforms improved conditions for many people. Voting rights were given to more people than ever before. The reign of Queen Victoria shifted control of the government from the monarch to the people. In its foreign affairs, Britain gained many colonies with rich resources. The country never again held such great power as it did during this era. The British people were optimistic, or hopeful, about their future. With a large empire, a strong navy, a rich economy, and excellent leadership, they had a right to be optimistic about their future.