



## **Organising a Victorian Experience Day**

**By Stephen H Clark**

[www.victorianschool.co.uk](http://www.victorianschool.co.uk)

*Stephen Clark has been involved in Victorian School re-enactment for several years, and now provides lessons in schools, as well as running a website on Victorian Schooling and the Victorian life.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Although it is best to take pupils to visit a real Victorian School if you can, this is not always possible, perhaps because of the distance or timing, so the next best thing is to create your own Victorian experience. This article suggests ways in which you can make the experience memorable and as authentic as possible.

### **THE SITE**

Ideally it is well to use a room or hall that looks Victorian. This may not be easy in modern schools, but have you considered nearby buildings? A local church may have a suitable room or hall that is not too modernized, or maybe there is a large house that would be prepared to offer a suitable room, a manor house, or a stately home, maybe. But even if this is not available, then a classroom or hall can, with a little effort, be suitably “aged”.

### **PREPARING A CLASSROOM**

One of the most glaring differences between a Victorian school and a modern school is the wall decoration. Most classrooms have many noticeboards, charts and posters, providing a colourful visual display. Not very Victorian! Somehow these need to be covered over with drab coloured paper or material. The walls should be mainly plain, although there are a few items that can be displayed, which we will come to later. Remember to cover whiteboards and video projectors as well!

Seating needs some thought, and probably some furniture rearrangement will be necessary. Ideally the desks/tables should be in long rows or in double desks with an aisle between them. The illustration will help to explain this. Modern tables are often covered with a plastic laminate, where Victorian desks would have been wooden, but there is not a lot that can be done about this, unfortunately. Some schools have wooden examination desks, and these might be a little more authentic.

The teacher would have a desk at the front, and the usual Victorian practice was a high desk and chair, so that the teacher could see more clearly. It is unlikely you will have

such a desk to hand, but do the best you can. A slight improvement can be made if the desk or table can be raised on a small platform.

Now to the most vital piece of equipment: the blackboard. This is a difficult one, if the school has thrown out all their blackboards and easels. You may be able to borrow one from another school, or get someone to knock one up. They are not that hard for a handy DIY person to make. Whatever you do though, you need a blackboard and easel.

Next for a few artefacts to add a bit of realism. You may be able to borrow some of these. A dunce's hat can easily be made from some card. A cane can be bought quite inexpensively. A handbell is another item which would have been found in schools, if not in the schoolroom. The children need a slate, slate pencil and cleaning cloth. You may want to have suitable old books such as primer, Bible, prayer book. You need a sand tray if you want to demonstrate sand writing. This is just a shallow tray filled with fine sand. An abacus is useful for adding and multiplying. You may also want to have (dip) pens, pencils, inkwells and inkbottles. No doubt there are other things which could be added, and it is left to your imagination and availability. You may be able to borrow some items from your local museum service.

Finally, for the walls, a portrait of Queen Victoria would be good. You can download and print one off if you want. You might also want to include things such as charts of times tables, the Lord's Prayer, dates of kings and queens and a map of the British Empire, but don't overdo the posters. You can easily create the posters, and if you want to age them a bit, an old, slightly damp tea bag works well.

## **DRESSING UP**

Of course dressing up creates the most visually noticeable part of the Victorian experience. You may want to ask parents to get involved by sending their children to school appropriately dressed, but there are other options on our website such as buying or hiring costumes. There is also an article which gives guidance on how children and grown ups would have dressed.

One thing to mention here is that it makes the experience much more authentic if everyone participates. It is rather a shame when some of the staff turn up in distinctly modern outfits.

You might like to consider having one or two special participants, who could visit for part of a lesson: the headmaster, the local Councillor, the Vicar, the wife of the Squire or landowner, and so on. Each of these can have a role to play, that adds to the experience, but they may require slightly different clothing. The Vicar would dress in clerical black, with a wide dog collar. The Victorian lady costume will be familiar to any devotee of costume drama, and can be quite elaborate. The merchant or councillor might wear a frock coat and cravat, or wing collar and tie, and these can be hired (from us or from the local fancy dress shop).

## **LESSON FORMAT**

Before the lesson all modern paraphernalia should be stored, bags, coats and so on. If not already in costume, children can dress. It is a good idea to introduce the idea of role play, and point out that the teachers will be playing a part. This helps to reassure nervous children who may find the strictness of the Victorian teacher rather scary. It also gets their cooperation and they better enter into the spirit of things.

Here is a possible outline, with more detail given below.

- Line up outside classroom.
- Teacher arrives and supervises children who stand behind their desks.
- Teacher greets children and they reply with: “good morning miss/sir”.
- Introduce a few facts about Queen Victoria and draw attention to her portrait.
- For older children a brief mention of the British Empire and the scope of British Sovereignty.
- Writing: introduction to sand tray and allow some children to try.
- Writing: introduction to slates. Ask children to write their name on slate and draw something.
- Writing: introduction to the copybook, dip pens and ink. Allow children to do some copybook writing. They can either copy from the blackboard or use a copybook with examples to reproduce. (older children)
- Punishment: Introduction to punishment: the Dunce’s hat for children that were slow or stupid.
- Punishment: Introduction to the cane and other forms of punishment.
- Devotional: works well with visiting “Vicar”. A simple Bible verse is read, and then children recite the Lord’s Prayer together. For the more adventurous you can sing a hymn such as All Things Bright and Beautiful, or Onward Christian Soldiers.
- Deportment: teach children about sitting straight, standing up straight. Check state of children’s hands and nails, and inspect their shoes.
- Arithmetic: recite some tables.
- Reading: read or get children to read a passage from a primer or Victorian book.
- History: recite the dates of kings and queens.
- Geography: identify countries on a map, or name capital cities.

The selection you make from the above list will vary with the age of the children and the amount of time you have with them. You will also need to decide on the appropriateness for the age group.

### **Behaviour**

One of the most important aspects to impress upon the children is the difference between modern school life, and that of the Victorian child. Children were expected to be seen and not heard. No child would speak to a teacher without first putting their hand up and then waiting to be asked. The teacher would be addressed as miss or sir (not Mrs as married women were not allowed to teach). There was a great deal of emphasis placed on standing in a straight line, standing still, hands out of pockets, that kind of thing. Before going into a classroom the children would line up outside, with boys in the front and girls behind. (Boys were considered more important in Victorian times and therefore may have merited special treatment.) On entering the classroom, the children would stand quietly behind their desk awaiting their teacher to tell them to sit. Boys and girls would sit separately, or more often be taught in separate classrooms. As it not usually possible to run separate boys’ and girls’ classes, then the closest effect is to have one block of boys and one block of girls. Caps and hats should be removed in class and there would probably have been hooks on wall for the children to hang them. You may have to compromise by leaving them on a spare desk.

Pupils should be reminded that if someone important comes into the class they should stand up and remain standing until told. A bit part player, such as the Vicar or Councillor could come in at a pre-arranged time to give the children this experience.

### **Queen Victoria and the British Empire**

Information on this is readily available. At the very least I would want to give her dates (1837-1901) and say that she was the longest serving monarch.

## Writing

Sand tray writing is surprisingly popular especially with younger children. A tray of fine sand is used, and a letter drawn in the sand with a finger. The image is erased by shaking the tray from side to side.

The slate can be used for basic writing such as writing a name or a simple word or sentence, or it can be used to copy work from the blackboard. The child can also be asked to draw a picture, maybe a flower. Victorians were very fond of nature drawings.

Older children can go further by using dip pens and ink. They can copy sentences off the blackboard or they can use a copybook which has a pre-printed sentence to imitate.

## Punishment

There is usually a rush to have a go at being a dunce! It is worth emphasising that in Victorian times to be a dunce would be a disgrace. Dunces were not always stupid but may have had learning difficulties which were not recognised in those days. The dunce would have to stand in the corner with the face to the wall, or sit on a dunce's stool for long periods of time. The cane, used for punishment, was given either on the hand or bottom. Teachers were not unwilling to use corporal punishment, and in some schools even prefects could give pupils a caning. Teachers also used a ruler as an effective form of punishment.

## Devotional

Although it may seem politically incorrect to include religious instruction in what has become a multi-cultural society, it has to be borne in mind that the Victorian School would have had a solid Christian base with many schools being attached to or owned by the church. Most schools would include prayers, Bible stories and the singing of hymns as part of the curriculum. Some schools would have included learning the catechism. In addition many of the other activities such as reading and writing would include moral teaching with children filling their copybooks with proverbs and wise sayings and reading stories that were strongly moralistic.

## Other subjects

Much of Victorian learning was done by rote, so a child would learn tables by reciting them every day until they are completely memorised. It does work, I learned tables that way and I can still do multiplication and mental arithmetic faster than many modern children. A similar learning method was applied to geography, where countries and capitals would be remembered, and history, which would be monarchs and dates, and dates of famous battles. As children progressed through the school they would have learnt more detail, but certainly it would have been a poor education by modern standards. Girls would do practical work such as needlework, while boys might learn carpentry or country skills.

---

## Additional things you might want to do:

- Playground activities such as hoops, stilts, tops, marbles, hopscotch and skipping. Also drill, which is just simple exercises.
- Decoupage is an easy craft activity and would certainly have been done in Victorian times. Ideas for this will be given in a future article.

- You might like to try to make a sampler with the class. It could be a group activity with various pupils taking turns to do part of it. Every Victorian schoolgirl would have made a sampler, and some of them were very skilled and intricate.
- Peg dolls are also another craft activity and most Victorian schoolgirls would have had a peg doll. Start with a dolly peg and dress it up with scraps of material. We will shortly be selling dolly peg kits.
- Toy boatmaking is a simple activity that might appeal more to boys. A boat would be carved from a piece of wood with a sharp penknife, with masts and rigging added. Balsa wood can be used as alternative, as this can be moulded with safer tools.
- What about a Victorian lunch? Cheese and bread, sliced meats, simple cakes and real lemonade make a great meal.