

Victorian Britain

Late 16th century England, though growing in importance, remained a bit-part player on the European stage.

Britain «really ruled the waves» during the 19th century, during the reigns of Victoria and her successor Edward VII.

During the Victorian age, Britain was the world's most powerful nation.

The single European conflict fought during Victoria's reign – the Crimean War of 1854-1856 – contrasted markedly with the 18th century, during which the British were involved in at least five major wars.

The Victorians believed that peace was a necessary precondition of long-term prosperity

Victoria's empire

In 1882 Britain was in the later stages of acquiring the largest empire the world had ever seen.

By the end of Victoria's reign, the British empire extended over about one-fifth of the earth's surface.

These acquisitions were not uncontested.

A number of colonial wars were fought and insurgencies put down.

Britain's status as the financial capital of the world also secured investment inflows which preserved its immense prosperity.

Commerce and overseas trade had been essential in making Britain the world's greatest power during the 19th century.

Industrial Revolution

Victoria came to the throne during the early phase of the world's first industrial revolution.

Industrialization brought with it new markets and greater prosperity.

It also brought rapid, and sometimes chaotic change as towns and cities expanded.

Poor housing conditions, long working hours, infectious disease and premature death were the inevitable consequence.

The Victorian town symbolised Britain's progress and world preminence, but it also witnessed some of the most deprived people in the civilised world.

Britain's teeming cities presented a huge challenge.

Mortality data revealed that, in the poorer quarters of Britain's larger cities, almost one child in five born alive in the 1830s and 1840s had died by the age of five.

Polluted water and damp housing were the main causes.

Death rates in Britain as a whole remained above 20 per thousand until the 1880s and only dropped to 17 by the end of Victoria's reign.

One of the great scourges of the age, tuberculosis, remained unconquered, claiming between 60,000 and 70,000 lives in each decade of Victoria's reign.

Civic engagement

Despite substantial medical advances and well-informed campaigns, progress in public health was desperately slow in Victoria's reign.

This had to do with scepticism about the opinions of the experts, particularly when those experts advocated greater centralised state interference in what they considered to be the proper sphere of local authorities.

State involvement meant higher taxes.

Higher taxes hampered business and job creation.

The Victorian era saw considerable expenditure on monuments to civic pride.

Libraries, wash-houses and swimming baths were all funded to provide working people with the means to improve themselves.

Civic identity and engagement were more powerful forces in Victorian than in early 20th century Britain.

Furthermore there were many charity organisations.

These national organisations were multiplied several-fold by local charities.

Christian gentlemen considered it a duty to make a legacies to worthy causes.

Most Victorian charities were aimed at those sections of the working classes disposed towards helping themselves, but its overall impact should not be underestimated.