

Life at School

When Victoria came to the throne very few children went to school. Most children went out to work instead. Some parents were able to pay a few pennies each week to send their children to Dame Schools, but these were more like nurseries than real schools. Rich children were educated at home by governesses and tutors, and later sent away to boarding school. Middle class children were sent to private schools that were cheaper and less exclusive and often didn't provide very high standard of education.

In 1880 everything changed. The government made it compulsory for all children between the ages of five and ten. While they did not replace any of the existing schools, but to provide education for those who did not already go to school. The schools were built by a School Board, which had to ensure that education was available for everyone. These Board Schools did charge fees, but those who were too poor to pay had these fees waived. In 1899 the school leaving age was raised to twelve, but it wasn't until 1902 that the first secondary schools were built.

Life at school was very different from today. The desks were arranged rows and the classes could easily include ninety children. Work differed too. Children weren't expected to understand things, but rather to learn spelling rules, their tables, and practice handwriting daily. Often children would spend long periods of time copying from the bible or from the board.

Teachers could be very cruel and children who spoke out of turn or were late would be caned or birched. Children used slates to write on which could be wiped clean easily. Children were also expected to learn phrases like:

- Spare the rod, spoil the child;
- Children should be seen and not heard;
- Silence is golden
- Never speak until spoken to.

However difficult conditions were at school, children were much safer there than they had been when they worked in factories and down the mines

Eyewitness - School Time

I forgot to make a note of the first time of using the rod since taking charge of this school. Benjamin Watkins had one slap on each hand last Wednesday for kissing Agnes Bennett.

Crickhowell British School, 29th September 1874

Few in school again today. I have sent to several of the parents but they say that the children cannot be sent to school until the harvest is over

Crickhowell British School, 31st August 1875

School work again interrupted by non-attendance of all the elder children, who, notwithstanding the warnings of the Attendance Officer, are employed making hay

Llanbedr National School, 24th June 1878

Attendance thin all week owing to smallpox and whooping cough being prevalent in the neighbourhood.

Trewern School, 12th February 1883

A. Answer these questions by reading the main text:

1. Who educated the rich at home?

(1 mark)

2. What kind of schools did the rich attend?

(1 mark)

3. Were private schools very good? Explain your answer.

(2 marks)

4. How old did you have to be to start at school?

(1 mark)

5. Who was responsible for building the new schools?

(1 mark)

6. What kind of things did the children do at school?

(2 marks)

7. How were naughty children punished?

(2 marks)

8. What kind of sayings did the children learn?

(2 marks)

9. Were children better off before or after they had to go to school?

(2 marks)

10. Would you have wanted to attend a Victorian school? Explain your answer

(3 marks)

B. Answer the questions below using the Eye Witness Texts

1. Why was Benjamin Watkins caned?

(1 mark)

2. Why do you think it was important for the head teacher to record the use of the cane? Explain your answer

(2 marks)

3. What reasons are given for children being absent from school?

(2 marks)

4. Do you think that people who lived in the country thought school important? Explain your answer.

(2 marks)

5. What do you think would happen to you if you caught small pox and whooping cough?

(2 marks)

C. Write a passage of at least a hundred words imagining that you were in a Victorian School. Describe some of the lessons you attend, and some of the punishments you see.

(4 marks)