

Resource 1

The Victorian era - context

Queen Victoria reigned from 1837 to 1901. Only Queen Elizabeth II has reigned for longer.

The Victorian era was a period of rapid change. It witnessed huge developments in technology and industry and, as a result, great social and political change as well.

The population of Britain more than doubled during the period: the population of England and Wales was 16.8 million in 1851; by 1901 it had risen to 30.5 million.

The 'industrial revolution' had begun in the C18th and gathered pace in the Victorian era. Many people moved to towns and cities in search of work in the new factories. Cities expanded rapidly, but also became overcrowded.

Key industries were cotton and coal. Mechanisation in the textile industry meant that manual spinning wheels were replaced by giant powered looms. Both industries were major employers of children.

The steam engine led to the development of steam locomotives and the beginning of the rail network. The first inter-city railway line, between Liverpool and Manchester, opened in 1830. Queen Victoria made her first train journey in 1842. The rapid expansion of the railways in the 1840s and 1850s meant that ordinary people were also able to travel long distances for the first time.

Communication technology also changed rapidly. The railways made the transport of letters around the country much faster. The patent for the first telephone was filed in 1876.

Further research on technological developments throughout the Victorian era will enrich the drama work, in particular exploring the kind of equipment that might have been found in the home of a poor Victorian worker and in the Manor House.

The Victorian economic boom generated vast wealth in the UK. However not everyone benefited equally. Workers in the factories and the coal mines worked long hours, in dangerous conditions, for low wages. Pay and conditions gradually improved and new laws were introduced specifically dealing with the conditions of working children.

The legislation concerning child labour runs alongside education legislation. At the beginning of Victoria's reign only well-off families educated their children. A number of Education Acts between 1870 and 1893 provided for compulsory education for children between the ages of 5 and 13.