

The Classical Road Show

Rural Life in Victorian England

A history project to accompany Widecombe Fair



by Fern Dickson

What was life like in the countryside in the 1800s?

Introduction

Widecombe Fair is set in the 1840s in Devon, early in the reign of Queen Victoria. Victoria came to the throne in 1837 aged just 18. She was queen for 63 years, which is the longest reign of any English monarch.



Queen Victoria in 1840, aged 21



Queen Victoria in 1890, aged 71

Many important changes which have shaped the way we live today happened during Queen Victoria's reign: new **inventions** such as the camera and the telephone, developments in **science and technology**, new **machinery** to do farm and factory work that used to be done by hand, new laws to improve living and working conditions, and a greater understanding of **medicine** so that people lived longer and could be cured of diseases. However, life was still very hard for many people in Victorian Britain, especially for children and labourers working in factories or on the land.

1. Village Life

In 1837, when Queen Victoria came to the throne, more than half of the population of England lived and worked in the countryside. Each village was quite self-contained, and wherever you were born you would probably spend your whole life there and never think of moving away.



A Victorian Farmer

The village was organised in a hierarchy with the rich landowner, or **Squire**, or at the top.

On the next level down were the **tenant farmers** who looked after the Squire's land and livestock. They would be provided with a house, and if they managed a large farm with fertile soil, the farmers had the opportunity to earn plenty of money and live comfortably. Also on the middle tier of village society were the **blacksmiths, carpenters, saddlers and other craftsmen**, who were essential to the life of the village and the smooth running of the farms.

At the bottom of the hierarchy were the poor **farm labourers** who did all the hard, physical work on the farm. The Squire would take most of the profit from the produce of his land, then the tenant farmer would get his share, and the labourers got paid very little.

Life was very hard for poor people living in the countryside, and if you were the child of a farm worker you would be one of the poorest people in Britain. During planting season and harvest you and your whole family would be out in the fields working from dawn till dusk in the freezing cold or the blazing sun.



Harvesters having a break

Country Craftsmen



The village blacksmith making horseshoes

Country craftsmen played an important role in the life of the village. They ran their own businesses and unlike the tenant farmers they were not under the control of the rich landowners. The Squires and farmers relied on them to make and mend the equipment they needed to keep the farms running smoothly.

The **blacksmith** was the most important craftsman in the village. His main task was to make shoes to protect the horses' hooves from wear and tear so that they could travel

further and work harder. The blacksmith would also make and repair iron farm tools. The blacksmith's smithy was the hub of the village, and men would stand around swapping news while they waited for their horse to be shod or their tools to be mended.

Carpenters made anything from chair legs, wooden bowls, spoons, and walking sticks to fence posts. They also built the wooden farm buildings such as cowsheds and barns.

Thatchers were needed to cover the roofs of village houses with straw thatch of wheat, rye or reeds. Thatched roofs were surprisingly strong and weatherproof.

The **wheelwrights** built wheels, carts and wagons.

Masons cut and carved the stones to build churches and bridges, and carved gravestones and other monuments. Other important village craftsmen included the **coopers** (barrel makers), **basketmakers**, **shoemakers**, **saddlers** and of course, the **bakers**.

2. Children at Work and at School

Farm Work

Village boys started work very young. William Howitt, a Victorian writer, described the jobs a village boy as young as six might do: guard the gates to stop cattle from straying; scare the birds; gather potatoes; sow beans; pick hops and apples; gather mushrooms and blackberries; herd flocks of geese or turkeys; drive sheep to market; lift and carry things around the farmyard; shred turnips or beetroot; hold sacks open for filling; bring in firewood.



As boys grew older they would graduate to ploughing and more skilled work needing stronger muscles. Some of these jobs might sound like fun, but farm work was physically exhausting.



Even very young children had to work hard on the farms.

One farm lad described how he felt at the end of the day: "Every night I dropped asleep over my supper, and then woke up just enough to crawl upstairs and fall into bed. A black depression spread over me. 'This is what it is going to be from now on,' I thought. 'Lifting, hauling, shoving, trudging about....'"

The Education Act of 1870 – new schools built all over Britain

Until 1870 there was no law requiring children to go to school. **The Education Act of 1870** was the beginning of the school system we have today. All children aged between 5 and 13 were to go to school, and new schools called **board schools**, each run by a board of governors, were established.



A Victorian classroom. The boy in the second row has been writing on a slate

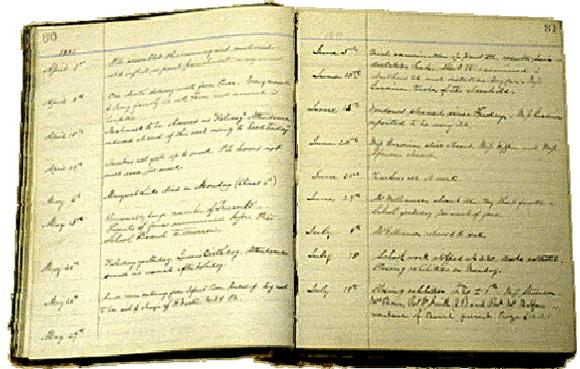
However, despite the new law, a lot of children still did not go to school. Children could do many useful farm or domestic jobs, so their parents often considered it a waste of time, money and valuable labour to send them to school.

Even fewer country children went to school in the summer because farmers needed them to help with **hop picking** or **haymaking**. Bad weather often prevented children from getting to school in

the winter. The nearest school might be miles away, which meant they would have to trudge for an hour or more in all weathers to get there. Older children would take turns giving their younger siblings a piggy back. There would be no room in the classrooms to dry damp clothes or boots, so if it had been raining or snowing the children would have to sit in their wet, cold things all day.

What was school like?

We know a lot about what life was like in Victorian schools because after 1870 teachers kept detailed written records, called **logbooks**. These were a written record of attendance, reasons for absences, punishments given and the school timetable



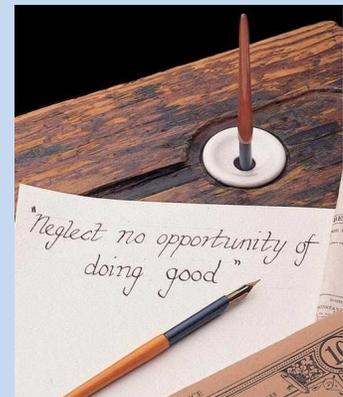
A Victorian school logbook

Reading and writing, Victorian style

The youngest children learned to write their letters with a stick or their finger in a tray of sand. Once they knew their letters, children wrote on **slates** with a slate pencil or chalk. Sand trays and slates were cheaper than paper because they could be smoothed over or wiped clean and used again. Older children were allowed to write with ink in their school exercise books, called **copybooks**, so-called because they had to practise their writing and learn by copying texts word for word.



All children learned to form their letters in exactly the same way, and this handwriting style was called **copperplate**.



Victorian lessons

Victorian school lessons were very different from the way they are today. Victorian education up to the age of 10 concentrated on **The Three Rs: Reading, (W)riting and (A)rithmetic**. Victorian teachers did not believe learning should be fun. It was meant to be hard, serious work, and children were expected to sit up straight and speak only when they were spoken to. Victorian children had to learn facts off by heart, and were expected to recite them from memory when asked. Today teachers believe that children learn best when they have lots of encouragement and are made to feel confident in their

"Obliged to use the stick very freely in school today, for without it I could in no way obtain anything like Discipline..."

Extract from master's logbook, Oxfordshire school, 1865

abilities. Victorian children were often beaten by their teachers with a leather strap or a stick if they got an answer wrong, or would be made to stand in the corner wearing a dunce's cap.



No **school lunches** were provided. Children would either go home for lunch if they lived near enough, or bring bread and dripping or cheese with them and eat it in the school yard if the weather was fine, or in the classroom if it was wet.

At the end of the school day the children would **sing a hymn**, or kneel at their desks while the teacher said a **prayer**. Once they were outside they were free at last and would play on their way home, bowling hoops (rolling a wooden hoop along with a stick), climbing trees, throwing snowballs, playing marbles, forgetting the hardships of the day before the hard work began



Playing marbles

all over again the following morning.

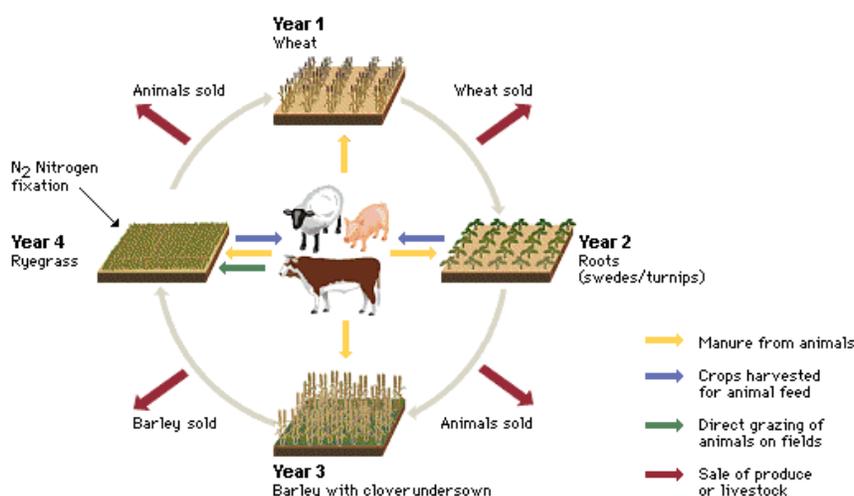
3. The Agricultural Revolution – how country life changed during the reign of Queen Victoria

What was the Agricultural Revolution?

Between around 1750 and 1900 new ways of farming and new inventions meant that British farmers could produce much more food from the land, using fewer workers to do it. At the same time **the population of Britain was growing fast – between 1750 and 1850 it increased by 6.5 million**. Most of the food needed to feed this growing British population had to be produced by the farms.

Enclosure and crop rotation

One of the biggest changes in the countryside which happened during Queen Victoria's reign was an increase in the **enclosure** of land to create large farms. This meant putting a fence, ditch or hedge all the way round the outer boundary of the smaller areas of land in and around the village to create one large enclosed area of farmland.



With bigger fields to work with, farmers could experiment with **crop rotation**.

For example, one year the farmer might plant **barley** in one field, a mixture of **ryegrass and clover** in another, **wheat** in a third and **turnips** in the fourth. The following year he would swap the crops around. Wheat and barley provide

food but take the goodness out of the soil, whereas turnips, ryegrass and clover put nutrients back in the soil and provide food for the farm animals through the winter. Rotating the crops this way improves the soil, which in turn means better crops.

In many villages the **Acts of Enclosure** passed by parliament were unpopular with poor farm workers who had their common land taken away. However, **enclosure** meant more land was farmed more efficiently, which in turn meant more food for the growing population.

Animal science

Victorians were fascinated by science and began to understand more about how to breed bigger, stronger animals which would grow faster and have more meat or wool on them. New kinds of specially-made animal feed were developed, and farmers experimented with crossing different breeds of farm animals to create new, bigger, stronger ones. Farmers were so proud of their prize animals that they would even have portraits painted of them.

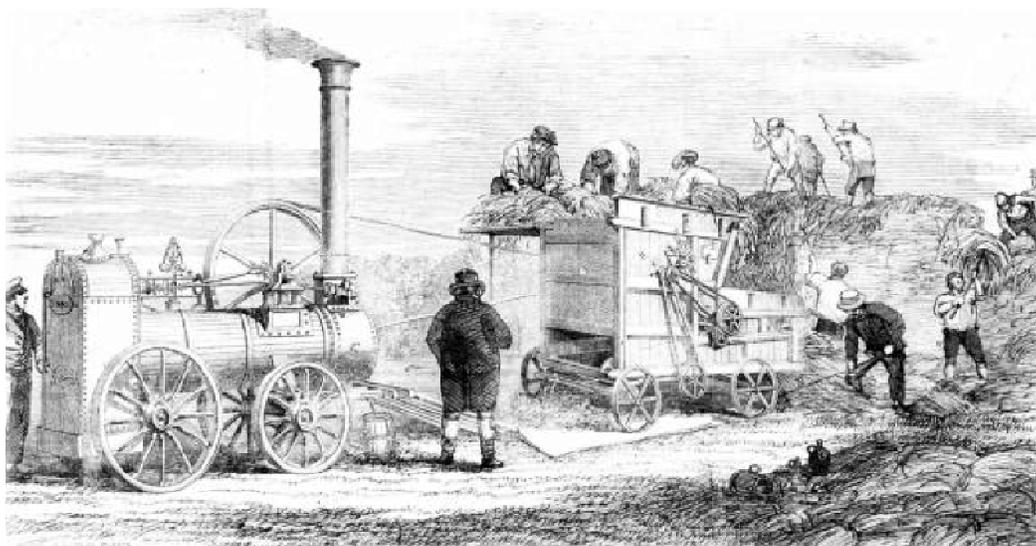


Machinery

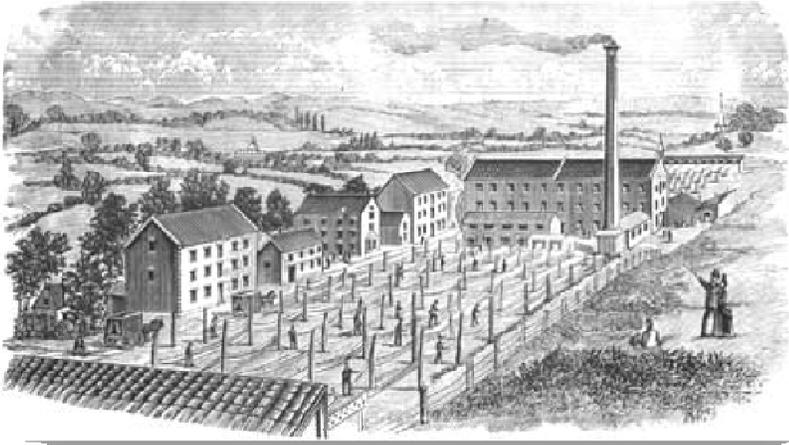
Between 1700 and 1850 Britain was a powerhouse of new ideas and inventions. **Factories** powered by huge water wheels and **machines** powered by steam were built to do the jobs that people had previously done by hand. **Railways and canals** were built so that heavy goods such as cotton and coal could more easily be moved around the country. This new age of factories, machines, railways and steam power is called **The Industrial Revolution**, and it had a big effect on the countryside in Victorian England.

As farms grew larger, new kinds of machines were invented to plough the land and sow and harvest the crops. Traditionally, harvesting took days. The corn was cut by hand with scythes, and gathered into sheaves with sickles.

New reaping machines began to replace them, each machine capable of doing the work of dozens of people. Steam-powered **threshing machines** were developed in the 1830s to separate the grains of wheat from the stalks, which until then had been done painstakingly by hand and could take weeks.



Threshing machine 1830



This new farm machinery meant that thousands of farm labourers were no longer needed to do their jobs by hand. These workers moved to the towns and cities to work in factories instead. **By 1900 three quarters of the population lived in the towns and cities.**

A Victorian textile mill. Hundreds of people, including children as young as 5, would have worked here making fabric for clothes

4. Country Fairs

Why were country fairs important?



Fairs have been part of English country life for more than a thousand years, and countryside communities depended on them for survival.



They were the only way that farmers could trade their produce and livestock on a large scale, and they were very important both socially and economically because they were opportunities for remote village communities to gather together in one place. They were also a place for labourers to find work. These hiring fairs, called Mop or Statute Fairs, brought jobseekers from far and wide, each wearing a symbol of their trade – for example, a shepherd would wear a skein of wool pinned to his lapel, or a servant girl might carry a broom so that employers could see at a glance what their skills were.

Fairs were also a rare opportunity for hard-working villagers to have fun and socialise, so there was also plenty of music, dancing, food, drink and entertainment on offer.



Bearded ladies and musical elephants

The biggest country fairs were a like a mixture of a market, a travelling circus of music and entertainment, a job centre and a huge party. In Victorian England fairs were massive events, with the biggest ones attracting crowds of up to **40,000 people**. Such big crowds of people carrying money provided rich pickings for thieves, and it was said that the only way to hang on to your wallet was to sew it into the lining of your clothes.

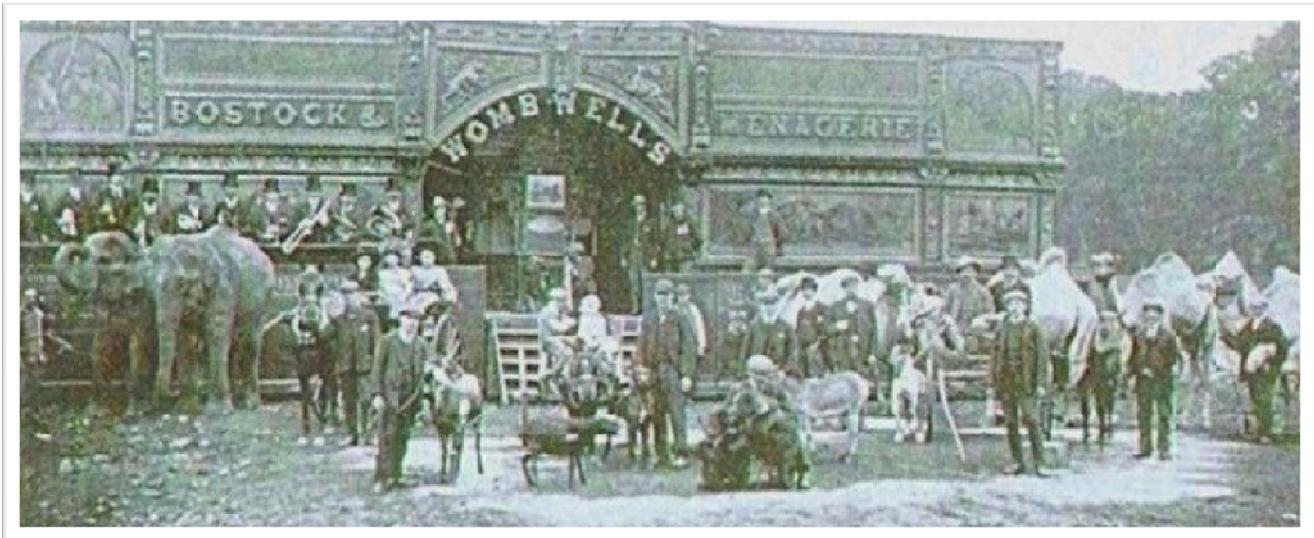
Fairs were a serious business for farmers, who would come to sell their produce – anything from farm animals to cheese, meat, milk, hops and barley for making beer could be traded at the fair. At the largest fairs up to **100,000 sheep** could be sold in one day. Other traders would come from miles around selling their wares, and if the fair was anywhere near the coast then merchants would even come from abroad to set up their stalls selling cloth, jewellery, medicines, leather and household goods.

A country fair like Widecombe would have been a riot of colour, noise, music and the smell of animals and food. Even the poorest people would dress up in their best clothes and travel from miles around on horses, carts or on foot. Some were prepared to travel for up to two days to get there, sleeping by the roadside if they couldn't afford a room for the night.

As you pushed your way through the crowds you would have been offered all kinds of entertainments. In the mid-1800s the biggest fairs featured showmen inviting fairgoers to pay their money and “roll up, roll up” to see their attractions. You could see anything from curiosity shows featuring **bearded ladies** (right), **strong men**, **boxing matches**, **ghost shows** (using smoke, mirrors and lanterns to create spooky optical illusions), **glass-blowing displays** and **waxworks**.



One particularly popular attraction was a **menagerie** (a travelling zoo). One menagerie which probably came to Widecombe Fair featured the Royal Modern Musical Elephant, an elephant which could play music by Handel.



Wombwell's menagerie, featuring camels and the Royal Modern Musical Elephant



By the 1850s fairground rides were becoming popular. Early **merry-go-rounds** or carousels were powered by ponies or volunteers on bicycles, but by the 1860s the first steam-powered merry-go-rounds appeared. These new inventions were so fast compared with their bike- **or horse-drawn predecessors that one reporter**

commented: *“the wonder is the daring riders are not shot off like cannon-balls, and driven half into the middle of next month”*. Many more steam-powered rides followed, which were the forerunners of the theme park rides we know today.

Fairground food



Stall-holders could make a lot of money selling ready-to-eat food to hungry fairgoers. Food-sellers would shout out, inviting passers-by to buy their wares. Many would have a fire going to cook pies or roast meat on a spit. At Widcombe Fair there would have been ‘**hot tiddy oggies**’ -- a local name for Cornish pasties which are a traditional speciality in Devon and Cornwall. Pasties are pastry parcels filled with meat, potatoes and sometimes vegetables.



They were originally the working lunch that tin miners would take underground with them: easy to carry, and easy to eat with dirty hands because you could eat the filling and throw away the last bit of dirty pastry.

Other popular fairground foods included fresh seasonal fruit and hot potatoes. There would also have been plenty of stalls and pubs selling **beer** and **scrumpy** (cider) to wash it all down.

5. Clothes

Country villagers worked hard during the day, and their clothes were tough and functional. All but the very poorest would have work clothes and another outfit for Sunday best.



Men and boys

In early Victorian times country men and boys still wore **smocks**— long shirt- or coat-like garments which came down below the knees, worn over trousers. By the end of the century they had started wearing **collarless cotton shirts, corduroy**

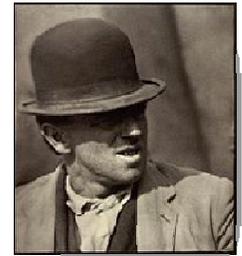
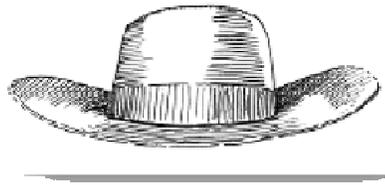
trousers and a cord or tweed jacket instead.

Rather than a jacket, some men preferred a long-sleeved waistcoat reaching down almost to their knees. These had a generous inside pocket big



enough to hide a hare or a pheasant for supper without anyone noticing.

Above and right: Early Victorian farm labourers wearing smocks. Later these were replaced by trousers and jackets, always with a hat, and a scarf tied round the neck



A brightly-coloured handkerchief would be worn tied round the neck to protect against sunburn or cold. A hat was always worn – this would be a 'wideawake', or later a bowler, billycock or a cap, depending on the wearer's age, status and the weather.

A billycock hat



Two young farm workers, late 1800s. Notice their patterned scarves, which would have been colourful. Their small caps show their youth and their lowly status. They are wearing corduroy jackets with large pockets. These clothes are more practical than the smocks that labourers in earlier Victorian years would have worn, and look more like modern-day clothes.

Women and girls

Victorian women were very skilled at sewing and mending, and they would alter hand-me-downs to fit



several children one after the other, repairing, dyeing and altering clothes until they were completely worn out.

Clothes had to be tough and practical for women working in the fields, and they needed to provide some protection from the weather.

A description of a Victorian female farm worker's clothes in the 1890s

“A skirt of thick material, stout boots, a large picturesque straw bonnet over a bright coloured handkerchief which covers the neck and lower part of the face. A shawl is worn over the shoulders, and over-sleeves are tied on while at work. In the summer a slip or pinafore is put on over the whole dress, and in the winter a wrapper or apron of stouter make.”

Younger girls wore pinafores over long dresses, and their underwear and stockings would have been made of calico or wool. Imagine how rough and scratchy this must have felt, and how uncomfortable all those layers would have been.



A Victorian farmer's wife. Notice her shawl and bonnet, and her over-sleeves to protect her arms from scratches while she is working in the fields. She is also wearing a long apron to protect her clothes underneath.

Boots

These were expensive and very tough. Often families couldn't afford to pay for their boots so they would have to pay the cobbler in instalments. Workers' boots were made from **leather with steel-capped toes and hobnailed soles**. The leather was very hard and uncomfortable and would have caused terrible chafes and blisters, especially if the boots got wet. Most people would have only one pair of boots so if they got soaked they would have to dry them by the fire ready for the next day, which made the leather even stiffer and more uncomfortable. In the winter children would suffer badly from painful feet and chilblains, and often could not manage to walk to school because their feet were so sore.

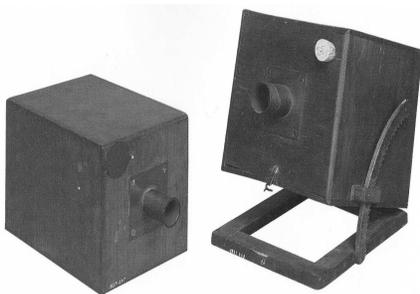
Special occasions



When harvest was over, or on saint's days or holidays, villagers would relax and spend their hard-earned wages enjoying themselves. During the long winter nights, social events would be organised in the schoolroom or a barn, with a big meal followed by singing and country dancing until the small hours of the morning. The biggest events of all were the country fairs and the annual feast days. Everyone knew how to dance, and women and girls would make an effort to dress up for these special occasions. One Victorian report describes how **"no inconsiderable part of the wages of a farm servant girl is expended on her person....A girl whose ordinary costume is a coarse petticoat....and wooden clogs, will appear at a dance in a white muslin dress, ...kid boots and gloves and with a wreath of artificial flowers on her head."**

6. Victorian Inventions

The Victorians had a thirst for knowledge and achievement, and many things which we take for granted in the modern world were invented in Victorian times.



One of the reasons why we know so much about what Victorian life was like is because we have photographs. The process of photography was developed by several different people, but in 1840 William Henry Fox Talbot invented the chemical procedure of printing photographs from negative images. This picture shows two early cameras.



In 1869 **Joseph Lister** (right) invented the first **antiseptic** – a chemical spray used during operations to kill bacteria and germs. Until then, people often died in hospital from infected wounds. Lister was a hospital surgeon, and he realised that



The first "**safety bicycle**" (*left*) was invented in 1885. This was the first bicycle with two wheels the same size, inflatable tyres and a chain. Before the safety bicycle, people used to ride around on bikes with a huge front wheel and a small back wheel, called 'Penny Farthings' (*right*) because the wheels looked like two coins – one large and one small.



The Victorians invented Christmas as we know it today. The traditions of putting up **Christmas trees** and sending **Christmas cards** were introduced by Queen Victoria's German husband, Prince Albert

The first **motor car** was built by German engineer Karl Benz in 1885. It had three wheels and no lights and could go at around four miles per hour.



In 1876 Scotsman Alexander Graham Bell was the first to patent the **telephone**. The first words ever heard over the telephone were: "**Mr Watson come here. I want to see you!**"



Listing every useful thing which was invented in Victorian times would fill several pages, but some other important things we can thank the **Victorians** for include **matches, typewriters, sewing**