



Experience Life in Victorian Times

The seaside in the Victorian era

For many, a trip to the seaside was a luxury that only the rich could afford. For them it was a place to promenade along the seafront showing off their finest clothes.

In Victorian times, the coast was increasingly seen as a healthy place to visit. Not only was the breezy sea air seen as refreshing and invigorating but the salty sea water was recommended as a cleansing drink. Drinking two pints of seawater was prescribed as a good cure! Many seaside towns developed a reputation as places to recover from illness and flourished as health spas.

For rich industrialists and their families living in the rapidly growing, dirty, smog filled factory towns, a visit to the coast would have been a welcomed break.

In Victorian times, the working classes worked every day (except Sundays when they were expected to attend church). They were not entitled to take holidays from their jobs and it was only when Bank holidays were introduced by law in 1870 that the working classes were able to enjoy a proper day off.

The growth of railways also meant travelling to the coast was more affordable.

Bathing

Bathing began as a health cure for men only and because the men were naked it was only allowed at certain times in designated areas. The invention of the bathing costume allowed women to use the beach. Bathing costumes were hired and the men and women bathers were strictly separated from one another at opposite ends of the beach.

Even though the first bathing costumes covered women from head to toe, being seen wearing one was akin to being seen in your underwear! Bathing machines would be wheeled onto the beach to the sea. These were small rented changing huts that ladies would enter from the beach and exit into the sea. Some had covered canopies that let you swim without being seen.

Other attractions

As the seaside resorts changed, so did people's views on acceptable behaviour. Families were soon able to enjoy mixed bathing. Many of the traditional seaside attractions that we enjoy today were actually introduced in Victorian times including donkey rides, aquariums, leisure piers and of course Punch & Judy shows.

Sunbathing was avoided by the rich upper and middle classes as only poorer people worked outside during the day had sun-tanned skin. Ladies would carry huge parasols umbrellas to protect them from the sun and men would still wear their full Sunday best suits on the beach – including a hat and tie!



In the 1920s the length of swimwear began to change which became smaller and smaller revealing more of the body.

It is because of the developing popularity of the seaside in the Victorian era that we still enjoy many of the activities that were enjoyed some 150 years ago.

The Seaside then and now

Life in the Victorian period was very different to modern times. This session aims to help children understand these differences.

The session starts by asking the children about their own holiday experiences - where they went and how they got there. Was it the same 150 years ago? Did you know that if you were poorly, you could be forced to drink two pints of sea water!

After this simple introduction the following areas are covered supported by our large handling collection including replica costume (swimwear through the years is hilarious), objects and archive photographs.

- What first attracted visitors to the Seaside?
- What did they wear?
- Did they swim?
- Did they use the beach like we do today?
- Did they do anything else at the seaside?
- What do early photographs show us and what did the first cameras look like?
- Did they have ice cream, sunglasses?
- Did they sunbathe?

During these discussions some children will be chosen to dress up in 'fancy clothes' to promenade and others will be asked to hold the swimming costumes up. Our object collection is also used to help set the scene and includes an original wooden Victorian spade, an early box camera, parasol and 'penny-a-lick'.

Don't forget to bring your camera to take photos.