READING MUSEUM SERVICE

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

VICTORIAN HOME LIFE H327/A



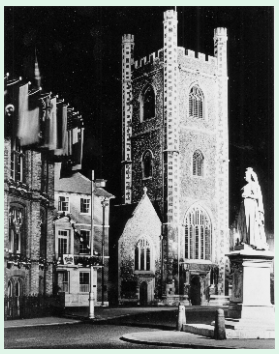
Queen Victoria reigned from 1837 to 1901. This is called the Victorian Period and was a time of great social, political and industrial change. The importance of these years can be seen throughout towns, like Reading, where statues are dedicated to Queen Victoria.

In the nineteenth century, towns and cities expanded as people migrated to find work. Cities such as London, Manchester, Birmingham and Glasgow were filled with people working long hours in often dangerous conditions. In 1901 the average life expectancy was still only 48.

Throughout the Victorian era more and more men were allowed to vote. In 1837 less than a fifth of men were eligible, by 1884 it had risen to two-thirds. Despite this it was not until 1918 that women were first able to vote.

Wealthier families could employ a cook to make their dinners and they enjoyed expensive drinks such as wine or punch. Poorer families had a very different life. Charles Booth wrote *Life and Labour of the People in London* at the end of the nineteenth century. He commented on poor living conditions,

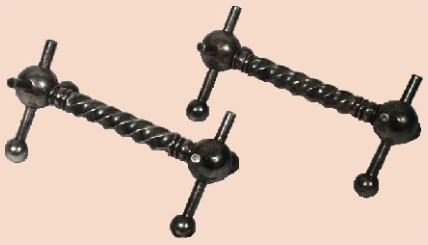
'The neighbouring clergy send soup two or three times a week, and practically no meat is bought. Beyond the dinners out, and the soup at home, the food consists principally of bread, margarine, tea and sugar.'



Above: The statue of Queen Victoria in front of Reading town hall.

Knife rests

In smart dining rooms carving knives were placed on rests to stop the table cloth getting dirty. They were a sign of wealth and sophistication. Material such as silver and gold were used to make the very best rests. These are a slightly cheaper version. The shiny metal plate is wearing thin to reveal the cheaper metal beneath.



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Buttonhook



Victorians wore tight clothing, which made it hard to bend over and tie their shoes or do up their clothes. The buttonhook helped pull buttons through stiff leather on boots, or fastened buttons on garments.

The hook is threaded through the buttonhole and then over the button. It is then pulled back through the hole. Doing this too hard often did more harm than good. It could tear the buttonhole or rip out the button.

The buttonhook was first used by men to help put on their riding boots but by the 1880s ladies began to use it as well. Women's fashion had changed from dainty footwear to boots made of leather that had up to sixteen buttons.

This buttonhook has a bone handle. It doesn't fit well with the hook. It is probable that the handle is a replacement for the original. The owner must have valued the tool very much to get it replaced.

Ebony Glove Stretchers



During the Victorian period gloves made of kid leather were popular. It was fashionable to have gloves with a tight fit, but they would shrink when they weren't being worn and become impossible to put on if not carefully looked after. The long ebony prongs would slide into the fingers of the glove and then squeezed so as to stretch them.

The gloves were an important accessory with lots of different styles for day and evening wear. Gloves were worn in all seasons for modesty, not just warmth.

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Hot water bottle



The hot water bottle would be filled with hot water and put in bed to keep your feet warm - or any other bit that was feeling chilly! Many of these stoneware bottles have a similar shape with a carrying handle at one end.

The rough shape shows that it was made by hand on a potter's wheel. At the end of the bottle is a marking showing it holds two pints of water. Can you see it? It would be wrapped in a towel before it was put in the bed. People who couldn't afford to buy a hot water bottle often used a brick that had been warmed in the fire instead.

Clay pipe



Nobody knows exactly when clay pipes were first used for smoking tobacco, but the idea was probably introduced in the sixteenth century when the plant was first brought to Britain. There have been many changes to the shape, size and design, but the basic structure and function has remained the same. A pipe has a long, thin stem with a round bowl on one end. The tobacco is packed into the bowl and lit with a match. The smoke draws up the stem towards the mouth. The pointed part that sticks out at the bottom is called the heel, and is designed to give the smoker a more secure grip.

This nineteenth century pipe is quite plain compared to some pipes of the Victorian period, which were elaborately decorated to illustrate events of the time or commemorate important dates. This pipe would have been made cheaply in a factory from a cast. The pipes weren't strong and the stem has broken off.