Victorian London

A time of expansion – a vast Empire and population growth in the cities

The Victorian era lasts from when Queen Victoria was crowned in 1837 until her death in 1901. At this time Britain became the largest Empire the world had ever known, taking land and supplies from many countries, particularly in Asia and Africa. The Industrial revolution (1760-1840) had brought railways and factories to cities across the country, and their populations were expanding. In London between 1831 and 1871 London's population doubled from 1.6 million people to 3.2 million, by 1900 it passed 4 million. Many of the new arrivals crowded into the old city centre.

Cholera, disease and sanitation

London was overcrowded, dirty and unhealthy. The increase in population meant that the city's housing, sewage disposal and water supply became inadequate. Diseases such as typhus, typhoid, tuberculosis, measles, dysentery, smallpox, scarlet fever and cholera took hold. The poor suffered the worst, they were weakened by a poor diet, terrible working conditions, and the damp, filthy slums they lived in. Cholera killed fewer people than other diseases but it hit the rich voting population so the government made public health Victorian London's most important issue.

Cleaning up the streets

Disease and sanitation issues needed to be fixed across the city. Embankments were built along the Thames narrowing the river making it flow faster and have a higher low tide, which was more hygienic. Joseph Bazalgette designed a sewage system to take waste further down the river. When it was complete in 1875 cholera never returned to London. Major city road redevelopments cleared away many of the slums, but with little thought about where the people living there would move to. Around 50,000 Londoners were homeless, the luckiest found a bed in a lodging house, but many slept on the streets. Housing issues were mostly only addressed by charitable individuals.

Surveying the poverty

Hundreds of thousands of people seemed to be living in poverty in London, but it was unclear exactly how many there were or how they worked and lived. In 1889 a scientific survey of poverty was completed, which mapped poverty across the whole city. It showed that 30.7% of London's population were living in poverty – caused by low wages and insecure employment (rather than 'moral weakness' as some people thought). The survey found that the charitable effort was not enough, and concluded that the government needed to help solve the problem.

Working on the street to avoid workhouses

No person capable of work could receive help from the government except via a workhouse. A workhouse fed and accommodated the poor in exchange for work. Conditions were terrible and families were split apart - men, women, boys and girls were separated. To avoid workhouses many people slept on the streets and made money selling fruit, vegetables, fish and other goods. Whole families would work in this way for generations. Immigrants, including Irish and Jewish communities, also worked in this way as they did not have other opportunities in the city.

Schooling for all – Victorian London's great success story

In 1870 a law was passed to provide schooling for children aged 5-12. Children in working class families were relied upon to work and earn an income, so it was hard to get these children to go to school. In 1876 it was made obligatory to attend and parents could be fined if they did not. In 1891 school became free. Still teachers had to use treats to encourage students to attend, and they provided awards for regular attendance. Students studied the bible, religion, reading, writing and arithmetic. Older students studied the history of England, geography, drawing, music, and drill. Free access to basic education took many people off the streets and gave them more opportunities.

Note: Students may place the paragraphs in a different order to create their story, and this is fine. Part of the exercise is for them to justify placing the paragraphs in the order they have.