

The Royal collection

Looking for Evidence of the Victorians around Buckingham Palace



Suggested locations for a walking tour of the area

Background Information

The lifetime of Queen Victoria (1819 -1901) was, for many, a period of peace and prosperity, founded on industrial manufacture and imperial expansion. Technological advances and massive population growth triggered rapid change in almost every walk of life. London sat at the centre of that transformation. The biggest city in the world, it was home to both unprecedented wealth and shocking poverty in equal measure. Many aspects of Victorian life can be seen in the vicinity of Buckingham Palace.

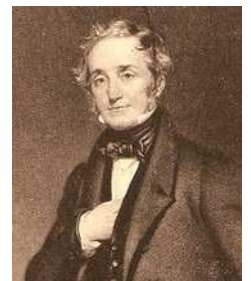
Belgravia and the Grosvenor Estate

This area is mostly owned by the Grosvenor family and you may see their family insignia, the wheatsheaf, along the way. The Grosvenor family named the area after Belgrave, a village on their Leicestershire estate.

In the early 19th century the area was a wasteland of swamps, sewers and rubbish dumps. However, when George IV started to develop Buckingham Palace nearby, Thomas Cubitt leased some land from Richard Grosvenor, the second Marquess of Westminster, to develop housing – anticipating that people would want to live close to royalty. The area soon became popular with fashionable society. Cubitt's initial development, Belgrave Square, was given the ultimate seal of approval in 1840 when Queen Victoria took a house there for her mother.

Thomas Cubbit, Victoria's Builder

When Thomas Cubbit, son of a Norfolk carpenter, died in 1855 he was one of the richest men in England. He made his fortune by building more of London's buildings than anyone had done before. He built fine houses for the elite in the great squares of Belgravia, town houses for the middle classes in Pimlico and Bloomsbury, villas for city merchants in Clapham and even a home for Queen Victoria and her family (Osborne House on the Isle of Wight). Victoria also asked him to extend and improve Buckingham Palace, according to her, '*A better, kinderhearted or more simple, unassuming man never breathed*'.



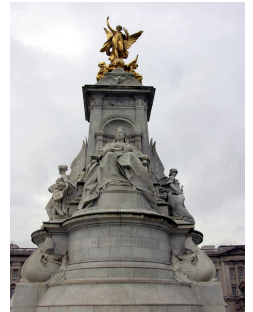
Buckingham Palace

Victoria was the first monarch to live in Buckingham Palace. When she became queen it was barely habitable – the drains were faulty, few of the lavatories were ventilated and many of the thousand windows wouldn't open. The building was completed in 1847 when a new wing to the east was added (facing the Mall today). Victoria grew very fond of the Palace and 8 of her 9 children were born here. Feeling that it lacked a large enough room to entertain, Victoria added a new ballroom. At the time it was the biggest room in London (it is big enough to fit 35 double-decker buses!).

The Victoria Memorial

Location: Outside Buckingham Palace, facing the Mall

This large memorial to Victoria was sculpted out of 2,300 tons of white marble by Thomas Brock in 1911. Victoria ('Regina Imperatrix' – 'Queen and Emperor') faces east and winged figures representing Justice, Truth and Charity face the other directions. On top is a gilded figure of Victory. The memorial has a maritime theme. There are ship's prows at each corner of the base, a shell shape behind Victoria's head and various mermaids and sea creatures around the outside wall – this was a period when Britain's nautical power ruled the seas.



The Royal Mews

Location: Buckingham Palace Road

The Royal Mews is where the royal family's horses and carriages are kept, including the magnificent Gold State Coach used for coronations. This is where Victoria watched her 9 children learn to ride. She also set up a school for the children of the servants who looked after the 200 horses she kept here. Motor cars, or 'horseless carriages', started to appear towards the end of Victoria's reign and nowadays the Mews also houses a fleet of cars, something Victoria would not have approved of: she is on record as saying *'I hope you will never allow one of those horrible machines to be used in my stables.'*



Mews Buildings

Location: Grosvenor Gardens Mews, Ebury Mews and others elsewhere in the area

The rich people who lived in this area kept their horses and carriages in mews (a bit like garages for cars today). Servants lived in amongst the horses and were kept busy waxing saddles and shovelling oats.

Mews were unhealthy, smelly places full of manure and rubbish.

Mews buildings are much smaller and slightly hidden down narrow cobbled streets (to keep the noise and smell away from the residents of the main houses!). These days mews houses are very popular to live in and you can still see what it was like in Victorian days - the wide carriage doors, wooden sash windows and cobbled streets (with no pavements).



Coal Holes

Location: Victoria Square, Buckingham Place Road and numerous other streets

On the pavements outside well-off Victorian houses you often find these round metal shapes – they are covering holes, through which Victorian households had their coal delivered. Victorian families in this area burnt coal in fires to heat their houses and ovens (it was before central heating!). Rather than dragging dirty coal sacks through people's homes, the coalmen used to drop it from their horse-drawn carts through this hatch straight into the cellar.

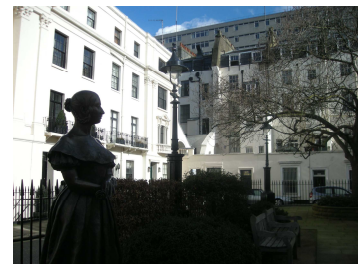


Scullery maids would then move the coal from the cellar to the fires and clean the house of all the dust created by the burning coal (a very hard job!).

Victoria Square

Location: between Buckingham Palace Road and Lower Grosvenor Place

Victoria Square was built in 1839 and named after the new queen. Victoria was only 18 when she became queen and there is a statue in the square (made in 2007) of her at the start of her reign, wearing typical fashions from the time.



Despite recent renovations, Victoria Square includes some Victorian features: Coal holes, tiled doorsteps and cast-iron railings. Originally railings were painted in different colours, but many were painted black following the death of Prince Albert, Victoria's husband in 1861. The houses are of typical Victorian layout – the servants' quarters would have been in the attic and the kitchen in the basement, with the families' rooms in between.

Cabman's shelter

Location: Grosvenor Gardens

Victorian taxis were horse-drawn carriages. Taxi drivers were not allowed to leave their carriage unattended, so when they needed a meal or protection from the weather, they used to head for the pub – often paying a child to look after their horse while they were inside. Members of the Temperance Movement, a Victorian group against excessive alcohol, built these shelters as an alternative to the pub. As they were on busy roads they couldn't take up too much space (they weren't allowed to be bigger than a horse and cart) yet they squeezed in a kitchen and room for 13 people to sit down. Many are still used for the same purpose today.



St Peter's Eaton Square C of E Primary School

Location: at the corner of Lower Belgrave Street and Ebury Street

When Victoria became queen, school education was mainly for the privileged few. In 1870 it was decided that all children aged between 5 and 10 had to go to school and new buildings were needed. This school was built in 1872 on land donated by the Marquess of Westminster. It has many features of typical Victorian school buildings: coloured patterns in the brickwork, triangular roofs ('gables'), high windows (so the children weren't distracted by passers by - compare the windows on Lower Belgrave Street with the houses next door) and separate entrances for boys, girls and infants. The Victorians believed in single sex education, with girls and boys also having separate playgrounds.



The Grosvenor Hotel

Location: beside Victoria Station, on Buckingham Palace Road

The arrival of the railways meant that London had more visitors, especially from abroad. To meet the increased demand, this hotel was built next to Victoria station in 1862. It was the greatest hotel London had ever seen and, at the time, it would have been the biggest building in the area by far. It was built with materials from around the country – brick from Suffolk and stone from Bath, probably transported on canals. It is a very grand hotel and shows how proud the Victorians were of their buildings and railways. If you look above the entrance (from the opposite side of the road) you can see stone busts of Victoria (wearing a crown) and Prince Albert.



Town Houses

Location: Buckingham Palace Road, between Eccleston Street and Elizabeth Street

The grand houses on Buckingham Palace Road have some Victorian features: black iron railings, Flemish brick bonding (where the short side of a brick is laid next to the long side in an alternating pattern), sash windows, coloured glass in the doors and coal holes outside.



Victoria Library

Location: corner of Buckingham Palace Road and Elizabeth Street

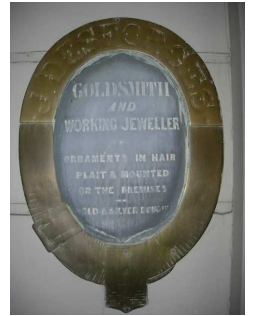
Victorian education laws introduced free schooling for younger children. However, if older people wanted to educate themselves they had to pay to join a library, which was often beyond the reach of poorer people. From 1850 the Victorians set up free public libraries so everyone was able to access books and newspapers to read and learn from. This public library was built for the people of Westminster in 1892. Its entrance is very grand with a beautiful tiled floor and boot scraper – a necessary item with muddy roads and so many horses around! At the back of the building (on Eccleston Place) you can see the original entrance to the Reading Room.



Shop Fronts

Location: Elizabeth Street

Elizabeth Street gives you a glimpse of a Victorian retail street. Small, specialist shops serve the wealthy residents of the local community today, as they would have done in days gone by. Look out for the signs for J Des Forges 'Goldsmith and Working Jeweller'. Also of interest is the house on the corner of Elizabeth Street and Ebury Street. From 1696 a tax was levied on the number of windows a house had. To avoid paying it, the residents of this house bricked up some their windows. The tax wasn't abolished until 1851.



Coleshill Buildings

Location: corner of Ebury Street and Pimlico Road

In Victorian times working class areas were overcrowded and unhealthy. Furthermore, many poorer people lost their homes because the railway companies wanted the land for tracks and stations. These flats were built in 1871 as 'model dwellings' for working class people. They had plenty of space and open staircases to allow fresh air in and provide escape if there was a fire. They were also self-contained with internal bathrooms and washing facilities. To live in these buildings you had to be in work and agree to live a morally upstanding life. You can see typical Victorian features such as sash windows, Flemish brick bonding (the long side of a brick next to the short side), cast iron railings and patterns of white and red brickwork.



Sydney Waterlow

Sydney Waterlow ran The Improved Industrial Dwellings Company that built these flats. He believed that the environment someone lived in was vital and he was very concerned that poor people had to live in dreadful conditions. The homes he built were thought to be better than the similar Peabody buildings as they were self-contained rather than having shared facilities. Waterlow made his money in printing and was involved in the Great Exhibition and The London, Chatham and Dover Railway. As well as building housing for the 'deserving poor', in 1889 he donated a large piece of land to be turned into a park to be a 'garden for the gardenless' (Waterlow Park in Highgate, North London).

Public Gardens

Location: Ebury Square, at the corner of Buckingham Palace Road and Pimlico Road

In 1815 about 1 million people lived in inner London, by 1901 this had increased to 4.5 million. This meant most land was needed to build houses. Luckily some Victorians felt that open space was important for people to exercise and relax. In 1872 the Marquess of Westminster opened this small park to the public, especially those working class people living in the new Coleshill Buildings (above).



Water Fountain

Location: corner Buckingham Palace Road and Pimlico Road

In Victorian times only the very rich had running water in their homes; most people had to fetch water from pipes in the road, or from open tanks. The water came from the river Thames, which was full of sewage, rubbish and waste from factories! Many people in London died from cholera, a disease caused by dirty water, in the 1840s and 1850s. Water was so dirty people often drank beer instead! The Victorians thought that everyone should have clean water and made laws to ensure drinking water was properly filtered. This led them to build drinking fountains, with safe, clean water for people to drink. This fountain was built in memory of Richard Grosvenor, Marquess of Westminster.



The Railways

Location: the view from Ebury Bridge, across the railway tracks

Railways are one of the most powerful symbols of Victorian progress. Looking south from Ebury Bridge you can see just what an impact the railways had on the local area. Lots of land was needed to lay the tracks – in some cases areas where poor people lived were destroyed to make way. In 1847 over 250,000 'navvies' (railway workers) were employed to lay thousands of miles of train track – a very hard job. The railways had a huge impact on the country. Transporting goods such as coal and iron long distances was made much easier and cheaper. It was also quicker for people to travel and more people started using the train to go to work or on holiday. The railways even changed time itself: before their arrival, towns in Britain had their own individual time, as the sun rises at different times across the country. In order for train schedules to make sense and to avoid total confusion everyone agreed to use London time (Greenwich Mean Time) in 1880.



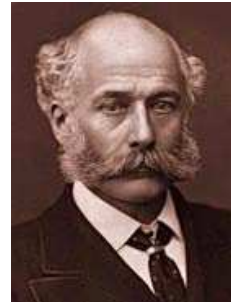
Water Pumps

Location: the view from Ebury Bridge to the Western Pumping Station

The tall thin brick tower on the right is a very important Victorian building. Before Victorian times sewage was kept in cess pits (covered holes in the ground) that were emptied by 'nightsoilmen' who transported it to the country for farmers to use as fertiliser. At the Great Exhibition in 1851 a new flushing toilet was demonstrated and everyone wanted one! Using flushing toilets meant that, as well as sewage, there was lots of water to dispose of. The cess pits quickly filled up, flooded and leaked into the drains used to take rain water to the river. Soon the Thames was full of sewage and turned brown. In the hot summer of 1858 the smell was so bad the politicians in the Houses of Parliament nearby had to stop work. For others the situation was more dangerous, as much of London's drinking water came from the Thames - the dirty water caused diseases such as cholera that killed many people.

Joseph Bazalgette

Joseph Bazalgette, a superb engineer, solved the problem. Between 1858 and 1875 he designed and built new sewers that intercepted the sewage before it got to the river. They are 82 miles long and used gravity so the water and sewage ran down hill from west to east London. At certain points the level of the sewage had to be raised so it could still flow downhill and big pumps were built to do that, and this is the chimney of one of them, built in 1875. Amazingly, Bazalgette's sewers are still used today – 150 years later.



Also from Ebury Bridge you can see:

St George's Row School (1898, now an adult education college).

The original Victorian train sheds.

The back of houses on Peabody Avenue – another set of model housing for working class people (built in the late 1870s).

(Battersea Power Station is a later building, from the 1930s.)

Victoria Station

Built between 1860-62, Victoria Station started off as two stations run by different companies. Both the main station entrances have been replaced since, but some of the original London, Chatham and Dover Rail Company's building can be seen in Hudson's Place. This building, made of London brick, has two pillared entrances with Queen Victoria's monogram over them. This is where royalty arriving by train from Europe was met.



A large glass and iron roof extends some distance over the tracks outside Victoria station. The posh people of the area insisted that the noisy, smoky trains should be covered up to stop their houses getting dirty!

Researched and written by Richard Donaldson.

To download a taster map to get you started on your walk, visit www.royalcollection.org.uk/victorians