

## Village Schools

In 1880, an Act of Parliament was passed making it compulsory for every child between five and ten years old to attend school. Prior to this, not many working class children received any formal education whatsoever.

During the Victorian era, a network of village schools was established. The majority of their first pupils had never been to school before, and teachers in all local schools found it difficult to get children to know what was expected from them in these new circumstances. The children were spilt into Standards or groups according to their ability, rather than age. A few of the more fortunate children had possibly learnt the alphabet from a family member who could read or had perhaps learnt to read at Sunday School in chapel or church.



A Victorian mixed-age classroom

A pupil could not leave a Standard and progress to the next until he or her had passed tests to prove they were ready. All these activities occurred in one room at the same time, as only one room was available to teach children in most village schools. Normally, Pupil Teachers, who were older pupils being trained to be teachers and receiving a small wage, taught the lower standards.

Teachers in the Victorian age were far stricter than the teachers of today and would often beat pupils to get them to behave or if they found it difficult to get pupils to do what was expected of them.

In the morning, the Headteacher would ring the hand bell and all pupils would form an orderly row outside the door. As they entered, the boys would have to take off their caps and put them on pegs or a shelf under the desk. The boys and girls would sit in rows quietly, with the older children at the back.

# THE VICTORIAN SCHOOL

Every teacher would use the sentence '*Children should be seen and not heard*' as the pupils went to sit in rows. The usual words to open every session was '*Good morning children*' by the teacher. All the pupils would answer politely '*Good morning sir*'. English was the learning medium at all times.

Behaviour and discipline were emphasised. If pupils were late they would be punished. The cane was a means of ensuring discipline! Good attendance and punctuality were rewarded with certificates. Normal lessons included elements of the 'Three Rs' namely 'Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic' as well as elements of dictation.

## Record Keeping

During the Victorian age, every school had to keep a daily log to include attendance, lessons, discipline and any other day to day matters relevant to the work of running a school. The daily routine followed the classroom clock.

9am – 12pm Prayer and morning lessons  
12pm – 2pm Lunch  
2pm– 5pm Afternoon lessons

## Learning Methods

Children usually learned by copying and writing things down or by chanting until they knew the words and had memorised them perfectly. A great deal of the learning entailed memorising.



Aid for memorising the alphabet

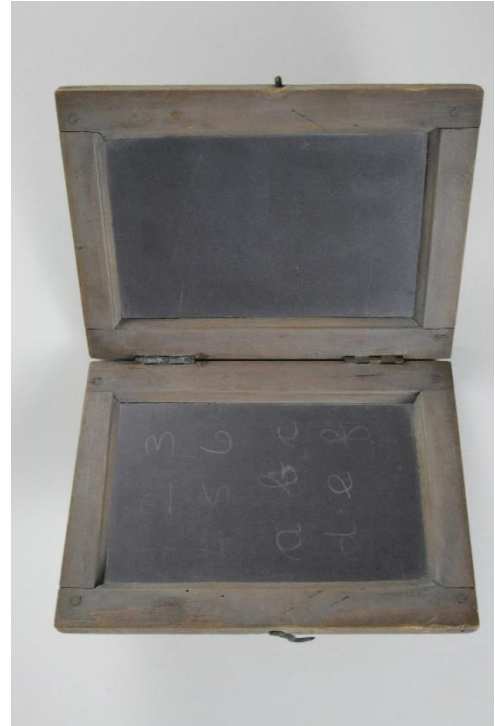
# THE VICTORIAN SCHOOL

## Writing on slates

Children learned to write by using slates. They marked letters on the slates using a slate pencil or a marking stone. Children were supposed to bring their own cloth to clean the slates, but most cleaned the slate by spitting and drying it with their sleeve. One reason why the writing slate lost its popularity was due to health and hygiene issues.

Writing slates were usually produced in buildings similar to factories and many of those were outside the slate quarries i.e. in villages or towns. By the 1880s as many as five factories produced writing slates in Bangor. A wooden edge was placed around the slate and a lead pencil was used to write on it, cleaning and reusing the slate time after time.

Various types of writing slates were produced, some were blank, some had lines, some had squares and some slates had maps.



Victorian Writing Slate

## Writing in books

The older children used pen and ink to write in books. Pupils were not allowed to write in books if they had not mastered 'cooperplate', which is a style of handwriting - similar to our cursive style today. Every morning the monitor would distribute the ink in pots. Children were punished if they made a mess with ink in their books. With books and paper being scarce, it was only the best work that would go into the books.





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## Reading

During the early period, children often learnt to read from the Bible, taking their turn to read sections of the Bible. The language of the Bible was different to everyday language, and very early on it was realised that it was necessary to get more suitable reading materials for children.

Books with moral stories were presented for children to read, but as the reading material had to last for a year the children re-read the book if they had finished it.

## Other Lessons

In addition to the daily reading, writing and mathematics, children had geography, history and singing lessons once a week. Girls were taught to sew and cook and the boys learned to garden as well as basic woodworking skills.

Science or nature studies were taught by 'looking at an object'. Snails, flowers, wheat, and objects of all types were placed on tables in front of the children.

The children's task was to describe the object. Usually the teachers would choose to write a description of the object themselves and would make the children copy the work off the blackboard.

Often there would be a close link with nature, gardening and farming.

Music lessons included learning hymns and Tonic sol-fa.



Tonic sol-fa - Modulator

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One of the favourite lessons of most children was the 'Drill', namely Physical Education. It was often an opportunity for them to go onto the school yard to do the exercises. The children had to jog, stretch and lift weights to the accompaniment of an old piano.



## Dunce Cap

Some children who had difficulties with learning had to wear the 'Dunce' cap. This was a cone shaped hat with a large D letter written on the front. This hat was placed on the head of a child and he/she was then made to stand on a stool at the back of the classroom.

## Prize giving

Punishment was not the only way to try to get children to come to school regularly. They also received awards, and schools gave awards to children for regular attendance.

There would be a special ceremony in the classroom to hand out awards to the children for good attendance and punctuality, memorising and oral examinations. Awards included medals, certificates and books.

## The Welsh Not

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In the 1890s, children were taught through the medium of English although Welsh was their first language. The Welsh Not, or Welsh Note, was a piece of wood or slate. It had the letters W.N. or the words Welsh Not/Welsh Note on it. It was used during the 18th and 19th centuries. Children were only meant to speak English at school, therefore the Welsh Not was placed around the neck of a child who spoke Welsh.



A Wooden Welsh Not

If the child with the Welsh Not heard someone else speaking Welsh, it was given to that child. At the end of the day the teacher would ask 'Who has the Welsh Not?' and the last child with it would be beaten with a cane. Of course, children were often very cunning and lied about each other to avoid being caned. Some parents were pleased that their children spoke English everyday at school, but others thought that it was a way of killing the Welsh Language.

## The Health and Well-being of Pupils

Children were often late or absent due to illness or because they needed to work to get additional income for the family at times when money was short.

The Victorian age was a time when poor families suffered due to the lack of a varied diet and fairly basic hygiene conditions. Under these conditions, children were often at risk of contracting illnesses and infections.

One of the matters that appear regularly in School Log Books is the mention of different types of illnesses. Such as diphtheria and scarlet fever, measles can be treated fairly easily today with modern drugs, however during the Victorian age these were serious illnesses and children could even die as a result.

Teachers knew that children who came to school from afar could come into contact with the illness at school and it could then be spread in this manner. This is why schools were closed at times when there were several cases of illness. Most schools were closed for part of every year due to illness.

## Bibliography / Useful Links

## THE VICTORIAN SCHOOL

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<https://victorianchildren.org/victorian-schools/>