Past Pleasures
How did the Victorians have fun?

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Introduction

During Queen Victoria’s reign big changes took place in the way people spent their leisure time. Bloodsports like bear baiting and cockfighting were banned. With the growth of the railways, people began to travel more and visiting the seaside began a popular pastime. But the railways also allowed local sporting teams to travel and so sports like cricket, football and rugby began to be organised with agreed rules and national competitions, such as the FA Cup. Lawn Tennis was invented in the 1830s and a new sight on the streets of Victorian Britain was the bicycle, in its various different designs.

There were still old favourites such as going to the circus or the theatre but the invention of the moving picture during the 1890's meant that a new dimension was added to theatre-going.

These photographs and posters from Victorian Britain can help us understand how leisure time was spent.

Tasks

1. Think about the kind of things you do in your spare time.
   a) Write a list of all the activities you do for fun in your spare time.
   b) Now write a list of the things you think you might have done if you had lived in the Victorian era.
   c) How are the two lists different? Is there anything on your modern list you don’t think you would have done in the Victorian era? Why is this?

Look at Source 1 & 2

2. This is an advert for John Sanger and Sons Royal Hippodrome & Menagerie, a kind of travelling circus:
   a) Do you think this would have been a popular show? Explain why.
   b) Look at the poster, what types of animals do you think you would have seen at this show?
   c) What do you think are the main differences between this show and a modern circus?

3. This is a poster for the Barnum and Bailey circus. Compare this poster to the one in Source 1:
   a) If you had to choose to go to one of the shows, which one would you have chosen and why?
   b) Do you think the Barnum and Bailey circus was as large as the one shown in Source 1?
Look at Source 3

4. This is a picture of a ladies cycle race drawn around 1891:
   a) Look at the bicycles the ladies are riding. How are these different from a modern bike?
   b) Compare what the ladies in the crowd are wearing with the ladies on the cycles. What are the main differences?
   c) How easy do you think it would have been to ride these bicycles? Why?

Look at Source 4

5. This is a photograph of people playing Croquet in 1872:
   a) Look at the way the ladies are dressed in this photograph, how is it different to the image in Source 4?

Look at Source 5 a, b, c & d

6. Look at these photographs of Victorian sporting pastimes:
   a) How many sports can you recognise?
   b) Do you notice any differences between the sports then and now?
   c) What kind of people do you think would have taken part in these sports?
   d) What kind of people would watch these sports?
   e) Do you think these were organised matches, or were they just local events? Why do you think that?
   f) Compare the photographs of these sporting events to the ones you see today, are they the same or different and how?

Look at Source 6 a, b & c

7. These are posters from 3 different performances the Victorians might have attended:
   a) What type of people do you think might have gone to each of these performances?
   b) Look at Source 5a. What is unusual about what the people are doing?
   c) Look at how the people in the audience are dressed, what class of people do you think they might be?
   d) Look at Source 5b. How large an event do you think this would have been?
   e) Do you think it would have been popular? Why?
   f) Look at the uniforms of the people who will be involved. List all the different roles you can see.
   g) Look at Source 5c. How similar do you think this pantomime would have been to one you would go and see today?
   h) Do you think you would be interested in the story from what you can see in the poster?
   i) Which of the 3 events would you most like to go and see? Why?
Look at Source 7

8. This is a poster advertising Blackpool from 1889.
   a) What kind of things would you have been able to do when you visited Blackpool?
   b) Do you think it was a popular resort? Why?
   c) Think about what you know about modern Blackpool, how does it compare with what is on this poster?

9. Look at all the Sources again
   a) Did men and women take part in the same activities?
   b) Do we spend our leisure time doing these things today? Give reasons for your answer.
   c) What do these sources tell us about how Victorian men and women enjoyed themselves?
   d) Is there anything else we can find out about the Victorians from these sources?

Background

During the Victorian era there were many changes to how people lived, and the ways they spent their spare time.

The Victorians enjoyed listening to brass bands and attending 'spectacles'. These shows included hypnotism or even communication with the dead using mediums! Circuses and performing menageries were also popular, with Britain being visited by some of the most famous of the time including the Barnam and Bailey Circus who frequently came over from America.

The rise in photography and moving pictures meant that people started going to the theatre, not only to enjoy plays and "spectacles", but also to watch recordings of sporting events as you can see from the sources here.

Sporting pastimes, such as cycling, rowing and horseracing were also popular, and large crowds would often attend sailing events like the Henley Regatta and famous horse races such as the Epsom Derby.

One of the largest events of the Victorian calendar was the famous Great Exhibition, held in 1851. This huge event was organised by Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria, and was held in Hyde Park in London. At the centre of the exhibition was the famous "Crystal Palace" which was built to house the exhibitions of culture and industry from around the Empire.
Teachers Notes

This lesson is designed to support History KS 1-2, units 11 and 12. Teachers may wish to download the images, and use them to make a series of cards and allow the pupils to physically sort the images as they work their way through the task.

These images can be used for extension work beyond the basic questions asked in the Snapshot. The design and images used in the adverts reveals much about Victorian attitudes. The images also lend themselves to individual investigation.

Sources

Source 1: COPY 1/108 f.220 - Cycle race Liffe & Son, Coventry 1893
Source 2 : COPY 1/89 f.104 - John Sanger and Sons Royal Hippodrome & Menagerie 1890
Source 3 : RAIL 1014/51 - Great Western Railway Collection Posters Taff Vale Railway Barnum & Bailey Circus at Cardiff 21 June 1893
Source 4 : COPY 1/95 f.294 - Cyclists 1891
Source 5a : COPY 1/450 - Tottenham Hotspur 1901
Source 5b : COPY 1/392 Boxer Ching Hock
Source 5c : COPY 1/50 - Gloucestershire Cricket Club W G Grace seated at centre 1880
Source 5d : COPY 1/18 f.365 - Croquet on the lawn 1872
Source 6a : COPY 1.49 f.267 - Filmed boxing match presented in theatre 1899
Source 6b : COPY 1/128 f.84 - Grand Volunteer Tournament and Military Fete August 1896
Source 6c : COPY 1/76 f.133 - Robinson Crusoe 1886
Source 7 : COPY 1/88 f.593 - Blackpool Health & pleasure resort 1889

Extension Questions

How did the bike shown in Source 3 get its nickname, the ‘Penny Farthing’?
Which sources suggest that:

- Mass spectator sports such as football, had become more common?
- Improvements in transport had changed some leisure activities?
- Some sports were organised on a national basis?
- Advances in technology had created new leisure activities?

Schemes of Work

What was it like for children living in Victorian Britain?
Key Stage 1 & 2 Unit 11

How did life change in our locality in Victorian Times?
Key Stage 1-2 Unit 12

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Source 1: John Sanger and Sons Royal Hippodrome & Menagerie 1890 (COPY 1/89 f.104)
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Source 7: Blackpool Health & pleasure resort 1889 (COPY 1/88 f.593)
Climate

The climate is remarkably equable, the summer cool, the winter not severe. The temperature of Blackpool is midway between the two extremes, those places which are above it being, almost without exception, situate in the extreme south of England. Compared with other leading health-resorts, Blackpool occupies a very favourable position in respect of dryness of atmosphere (a most important attribute of a health resort), clearness of sky, amount of sunshine, and uniformity of temperature.

Special Attractions

High Sanitary Condition and Low Death-Rate.

The grand Open Sea and splendid Bathing Ground.

The new Electric Tramways on the Promenade.

The North and South Piers.

The Winter Gardens, Pavilion, and Opera House.

The Royal Palace Gardens.

The Aquarium, Menagerie and Aviary.

The Theatres, Baths, Belle Vue Gardens, &c.

Continuous Steamboat Traffic at reduced fares, from both piers for Douglas, Llandudno, Forness Abbey, Liverpool, Morecambe, Glasson Dock, and Southport, and for hourly trips to sea.

Accommodation

Blackpool, with its magnificent Sea, is only about 30 minutes' journey by train from Preston, and abounds in first class Hotels, Coffee Palaces, Dining Rooms, Boarding-houses, and Private Apartments, providing together accommodation for upwards of 80,000 visitors at one time.

Excellent Sailing and other Pleasure Boats, under experienced boatmen, ply daily.

Superior Landaus and other conveyances are constantly on hire at very reasonable rates.

Through Bookings from all Stations on the Manchester, Sheffield, & Lincolnshire Railway
Official Guide with Map, &c, to be had at the RAILWAY BOOKSTALLS throughout England