



The National Archives

Education Service



Victorian Family History

How can we find out about the life of a Victorian child using family sources?

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Introduction

History books are often full of the lives of king and queens, famous leaders and thinkers. What about ordinary people? These people are also our ancestors or distant relatives in the past. They lived through the times in history that we now read about. Can we find out about their lives? With a bit of work, the answer to this question is yes!

Every time somebody is born in the UK, a record called a birth certificate is made. It contains facts such as the baby's name, where and when they were born, the name of their parents, and what the parents do for a job. We all have a birth certificate if we were born in the UK.

Marriages and deaths are also written down in the same way. Making these records is called civil registration. It began in England and Wales in 1837 when Queen Victoria came to the throne. There should be a record of everyone who lived after this date.

The Victorians used another set of records called the census to collect information. The first census records began in 1801 as a simple count of the number of people who lived in each house throughout the country. This was done every ten years. We still carry out the census today.

From 1841 onwards, the name of every person was written down. After 1851, other facts were added such as the age of each person, their relationships within the family (wife, son, daughter), occupation (job) and place of birth. These facts can tell us quite a bit about the Victorian family. So, we can find out how different people lived, from royalty to ordinary people!

Complete the following tasks to build up a picture of the family history of William Robert Towers, a young Victorian boy.

Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. William Towers was born when Queen Victoria was on the throne. His birth certificate gives us important facts about his family.
 - a) When was William born?
 - b) Who were William's parents?
 - c) What was William's mother's last name before she married?
 - d) What did William's father do for a living?
 - e) Where did the Towers family live?

Look at Source 2

2. You can find out more about William and his family from the 1871 census return. Each column in the census tells us different things. The first column gives the address of the family. Reading from left to right, you can find out the name of the person, their relationship to the head of the family (usually the oldest man), if they were married or not, their age, occupation (job) and place of birth.
- Where did William live?
 - What did William's father do for a living?
 - How old was William's mother?
 - Where was William's mother born?
 - How many brothers did William have?
 - Where was William's sister born?

Look at Source 3

3. Source 3a shows us why William was sent to prison in 1872. Victorian Britain was a tough place to grow up in. Many people lived in crowded cities, with large families and not much money to buy food. Crime was a problem. Punishments were hard for people who broke the law, even if they were children.

Source 3b is the census return for 1881. It shows that William was 20 years old in 1881 and lived with his family. He worked as a bricklayer with his father. The family had left the area where they were living at the time William went to prison and moved to Battersea.

Write a story about William's crime and what happened after he was let out of prison. Use the points below to plan your story.

William's crime

- What was William thinking when he carried out his crime?
- Why do you think William stole the rabbits?
- Do you think he wanted them for pets or might the family have another use for them?

William sent to prison

- When William was caught, how do you think he felt?
- What do you think it would have been like to be put in prison for one month, without seeing your family?
- Do you think William was too young to go to prison?
- What do you think 'hard labour' means?

William set free

- How do you think he felt when he came out of prison?
- What happened to the family next?
- Where did the family live in 1881?

- Do you think they moved because of William's crime?
- What job did William do?
- Were any of his brothers working?
- How do you think William felt now?

Look at Source 4

4. This is the census return for the Towers family for 1901. This date marks the end of Victorian times, as the Queen died that year. By this time, William had married and had children.
- a) How many rooms did William's family have?
 - b) How many children did William have?
 - c) Did any of William's children work?
 - d) What jobs did they do?
 - e) How old were his children?
 - f) Why do you think these children were working?
 - g) What does this tell us about their family life?
 - h) Do you think William's family was rich or poor? Give reasons for your answer

Background

Using family history sources like a birth certificate or a census return we can draw a family tree to show William Tower's family. A family tree is a simple diagram that allows you to show how people are related to one another.

Our story is about William, so we place him at the centre of the tree. His date of birth can be added by using his birth certificate.

William Robert Towers
b. 1861

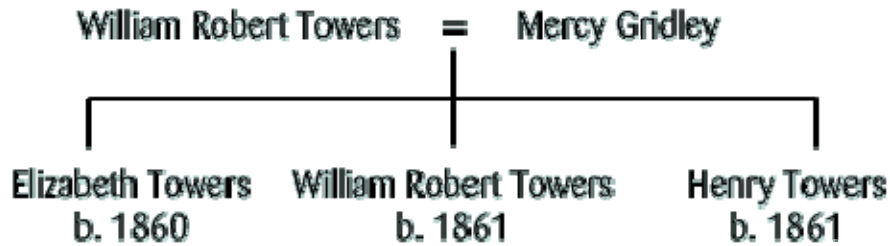
We also know the names of William's parents. They can be added to the tree above William, joined to him by a line to show he is their son

William Robert Towers **Mercy Gridley**
|
William Robert Towers
b. 1861

We know that William Robert Towers and Mercy Gridley married. We can use either '=' or 'm' to show this.

William Robert Towers = **Mercy Gridley**
|
William Robert Towers
b. 1861

We can also add William's sister and brothers to the tree. Usually, older children are placed on the left, with the youngest on the right.



We could go on adding the names of William's wife and children and other relatives to this family tree.

Your turn

1. With the help of your family, can you draw your own family tree? Use this tree as an example. You might need a large piece of paper if you have a big family! Have you got any records at home that can help, like we had for William Robert Towers?
2. Can you find any photos of the people in your family tree?
3. Ask your family if there are stories that they remember about their parents and grandparents. Imagine what it must have been like to be a child when they were growing up. You might want to write down some of these stories. Perhaps you can be the historian for your family!

Teachers Notes

This lesson features family history documents from the Victorian period. The originals, with the exception of his birth certificate, are held at the National Archives.

Sources

To trace the history of William Robert Towers, we have used his birth certificate, plus census returns for 1871, 1881 and 1901. Also included are the charge papers for William's spell in prison after stealing two pet rabbits. The questions encourage pupils to investigate the sources and try and build up a picture of his life. All sources have simplified transcripts to help pupils to understand the complex language of official documents. Square brackets indicate words that were not in the original document.

Tasks

The intent is that children will gain a sense of how sources can be used to find out things about the past. The tasks are designed to progress in difficulty as more sources are introduced, so that pupils will gain confidence in drawing their own conclusions from the evidence.

Children can also develop their understanding of the concepts of change and continuity by discovering something about the childhood of a poor Victorian boy.

Mapping the family history of a particular Victorian child can be used to develop chronological awareness.

Family history activity

The family history activity is one that children can complete with their parents and carers. It can be done independently of the questions and tasks in the first section of the snapshot.

Hopefully, children will be encouraged to gain a sense of where they come from and how this links to where they are today. They can see how things have changed or remained the same. Good luck with tracing your family history and developing your child's sense of history!

Teachers could use this activity as homework or as a project-based exercise to compliment the tasks.

More activities

Pupils could be organised into groups to work on different sources and report back their findings to the rest of class.

Write a biography of William or draw his family tree.

Construct a short drama about the imprisonment of William, or role-play an interview with him about his family life.

Create a timeline of the Victorian period, including the dates of William and his family.

Use the census material in source 5 to look at other families listed there in terms of their size, occupations, housing and so on.

Use the sources as a stimulus for creative writing.

Schemes of Work

What was it like for children living in Victorian Britain?

Key Stage 1 & 2 Unit 11

Source 1 : Birth Certificate for William Robert Towers 1861

REGISTRATION DISTRICT										
Richmond Surrey										
1861 BIRTH in the Sub-district of Richmond in the County of Surrey										
Columns-	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
No.	When and where born	Name, if any	Sex	Name and surname of father	Name, surname and maiden surname of mother	Occupation of father	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar	Name entered after registration
103	10th January 1861 New Road Richmond	William Robert	Boy	William Robert Towers	Mrs Mary Towers formerly Gridley	Bookbinder Journeyman	Mrs Mary Towers Mother New Road Richmond	10th January 1861	James Davnell Registrar	

Source 1 : Transcript of Birth Certificate for William Robert Towers 1861

Full transcript

REGISTRATION DISTRICT Richmond Surrey										
1861 BIRTH in the Sub-district of Richmond in the County of Surrey										
Columns:-	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
No.	When and where born	Name, if any	Sex	Name and surname of father	Name, surname and maiden surname of mother	Occupation of father	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar	Name entered after registration
103	Nineteenth January 1861 Kew Road Richmond	William Robert	Boy	William Robert Towers	Mercy Towers formerly Gridley	Bricklayer Journeyman	Mercy Towers Mother Kew Road Richmond	Nineteenth February 1861	James Darnill Registrar	

Simplified transcript

DISTRICT Richmond Surrey										
1861 BIRTH in the district of Richmond in the County of Surrey										
Columns:-	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

No.	When and where born	Name, if any	Sex	Name and last name of father	Name, last name and unmarried name of mother	Job of father	Signature, description and address of mother	Date when written	Signature of person who wrote down the birth	Name entered later
103	19th January 1861, Kew Road Richmond	William Robert	Boy	William Robert Towers	Mercy Towers, formerly was called Gridley	Bricklayer, skilled worker	Mercy Towers, Mother, Kew Road Richmond	19th February 1861	James Darnill	

Source 2 : Census Return 1871 (RG 10/868)

AD, STREET, No., or NAME of HOUSE	HOUSES In- habited in U.K. or Foreign (No.)	NAME and Surname of each Person	RELATION to Head of Family	CON- DITION	AGE of Males/Females	Rank, Profession, or OCCUPATION	WHERE BORN	Whether			
								1. Deaf- and-Dumb	2. Blind	3. Imbecile or Idiot	4. Lunatic
9 Botton Place	1	William Toward	head	Mar	32	Bricklayer	Chelsea - Middx				
		Mary "	wife	Mar	28		Richmond - Surrey				
		Elizabeth "	daur	Unm	11		Woolwich "				
		William R. "	son	"	10		Richmond "				
		Henry "	"	"	7		" "				
		George "	"	"	6		" "				
		Edwin "	"	"	5		" "				
		James H. "	"	"	2		" "				
		Thomas "	"	"	9mo		" "				

Source 2 : Transcript of Census Return 1871 (RG 10/868)

Simplified Transcript

Number on census	Street, Number or Name of House	Houses		Name and Last name of each person	Relation to Head of family	Married or not	Age of		Position or job	Where Born	If 1. Deaf-and-Dumb 2. Blind 3. Imbecile or Idiot 4. Lunatic
		Lived in	Empty				Males	Females			

23	9 Bottons Place	1		William Towers	Head	Married	32		Bricklayer	Chelsea Middlesex	
				Mercy Towers	Wife	Married		28		Richmond Surrey	
				Elizabeth	Daughter	Unmarried		11		Mortlake Surrey	
				William R.	Son	Unmarried	10			Richmond	
				Henry	Son	Unmarried	7			Richmond	
				George	Son	Unmarried	6			Richmond	

				Edwin	Son	Unmarried	5			Richmond	
				James H.	Son	Unmarried	2			Richmond	
				Thomas	Son	Unmarried	9 Months			Richmond	

Full Transcript

No. on census	Road, Street, &c., No. or Name of House	Houses		Name and Surname of each person	Relation to Head of family	Condition	Age of		Rank, Profession, or Occupation	Where Born	Whether 1. Deaf-and-Dumb 2. Blind 3. Imbecile or Idiot 4. Lunatic
		Inhabited	Uninhabited (U.) or Building (B.)				Males	Females			

23	9 Bottoms Place	1		William Towers	Head	Married	32		Bricklayer	Chelsea Middlesex	
----	-----------------	---	--	----------------	------	---------	----	--	------------	----------------------	--


				Mercy Towers	Wife	Married		28		Richmond Surrey	
				Elizabeth Towers	Daughter	Unmarried		11		Mortlake Surrey	
				William R. Towers	Son	Unmarried	10			Richmond Surrey	
				Henry Towers	Son	Unmarried	7			Richmond Surrey	
				George Towers	Son	Unmarried	6			Richmond Surrey	
				Edwin Towers	Son	Unmarried	5			Richmond Surrey	
				James H. Towers	Son	Unmarried	2			Richmond Surrey	
				Thomas Towers	Son	Unmarried	9 Months			Richmond Surrey	

Source 3a : Charge sheet for William Robert Towers 1872 (PCOM 2/290/52)

Name *William Towers 4099*
and
Aliases

Age (on discharge) *12* Photograph of Prisoner.
Height..... *4ft 5½*
Hair..... *Brown*
Eyes *Brown*
Complexion..... *Fresh*
Where born..... *Richmond*
Married or single *Single*
Trade or occupation *None*
Any other distinguishing mark *None*

Description when liberated.



Address at time of apprehension *9 Botoms Place
New Richmond*

Whether summarily disposed of or tried by a Jury. *Summarily*

Place and date of conviction *Richmond
20 Dec 72*

Offence for which convicted *Simple Larceny L.A.
Stly 2 live tame rabbits*

If sentenced to Police Supervision, fact to be stated. Sentence *1 Mo' H.L.*

If liberated on Licence, date when sentence will expire.

Date to be liberated *16 Jan 73*

Intended residence after liberation *9 Botoms Place
New Richmond*

Source 3a : Transcript of charge sheet for William Robert Towers 1872 (PCOM 2/290/52)

Simplified transcript

Name	William Towers 4099
	Photo of Prisoner
Description when set free	
Age	12
Height	4 feet 5½ inches
Hair	Brown
Eyes	Brown
Skin	Fresh
Where born	Richmond
Married or single	Single
Job	none
Any other special marks [e.g. a scar]	none
Address when arrested	9 Botroms Place New Richmond
Case heard by a judge or tried by a Jury	Judge
Place and date when found guilty	Richmond 20 December 1872
Crime	Theft stealing 2 live tame rabbits
Sentence	1 month hard labour
Date to be set free	16 January 1873
Place where the person will live on leaving prison	9 Botroms Place New Richmond

Full transcript

Name and Aliases	William Towers 4099
	Photograph of Prisoner
Description when liberated	
Age (on discharge)	12
Height	4ft 5½ [inches]
Hair	Brown
Eyes	Brown

Complexion	Fresh
Where born	Richmond
Married or single	Single
Trade or occupation	none
Any other distinguishing mark	none
Address at time of apprehension	9 Botroms Place New Richmond
Whether summarily disposed of or tried by a Jury	Summarily
Place and date of conviction	Richmond 20 Dec [18]72
Offence for which convicted	Simple larceny stealing 2 live tame rabbits
Sentence	1 month. H.L.
If liberated on Licence, date when sentence will expire	
Date to be liberated	16 Jan [18]73
Intended residence after liberation	9 Botroms Place New Richmond

Glossary

Aliases	false names, different names
Apprehension	arrest (for a crime)
Age on discharge	age when set free
Complexion	appearance of the skin, usually the face
Conviction	when a jury or judge decides that a person is guilty of a crime
Date to be liberated	date to be let out of prison
Discharge	let out, release
Distinguishing	different, distinct, recognisable (a distinguishing mark might be a scar for example)
Expire	end, finish
Intended residence after liberation	place where the person will live on leaving prison
H.L.	hard labour (hard, difficult, boring)

Jury	a group of people in a law court who listen to the evidence and decide if a person is guilty or not
Larceny	theft, stealing someone's property
Liberated on licence	the person is set free but a record is kept of their crime and they must not commit another crime for some time afterwards
Offence	crime
Sentence	punishment given to a person found guilty of a crime
Summarily disposed	when a judge or magistrate hears a case without a jury and decides if the law has been broken

Source 3b : 1881 Census Return (RG 11/648)

No. of Schedule	ROAD, STREET, &c., and No. or NAME of HOUSE	HOUSES		NAME and Surname of each Person	RELATION to Head of Family	CON-DITION as to Marriage	AGE last Birthday of		Rank, Profession, or OCCUPATION	WHERE BORN		If (1) Deaf-and-Dumb (2) Blind (3) Imbecile or Idiot (4) Lunatic
		Occupied (A) or Building (B)	Unoccupied (C)				Male	Female				
102	3 1/2 St	1		William R. Invers	Head	Mar	39		Bricklayer	Wiltshire	Wiltshire	
				Mary Do	Wife	Mar				Surrey	Richmond	
				William R. Do	Son	Mar	16		Do	Do	Do	
				George Do	Son	Mar	14		Labour	Do	Do	
				Henry Do	Son	Mar	14		Bricklayer	Do	Do	
				Edwin Do	Son	Mar	14			Do	Do	
				Thomas Do	Son	Mar	13		Scholar	Do	Do	
				Jim H. Do	Son	Mar	11		Do	Do	Do	
				Arthur Do	Son	Mar	9		Do	Do	Do	

Source 3b : Transcript of 1881 Census Return (RG 11/648)

Simplified transcript

Number on census	Street, Number or Name of House	Houses		Name and Last name of each person	Relation to Head of family	Married or not	Age of		Position or job	Where Born	If 1. Deaf-and-Dumb 2. Blind 3. Imbecile or Idiot 4. Lunatic
		Lived in	Empty				Males	Females			

102	3½ George St.	1		William R. Towers	Head	Married	42		Bricklayer	Middlesex , Chelsea	
				Mercy Towers	Wife	Married		39		Surrey, Richmond	
				William R. Towers	Son	Unmarried	20		Bricklayer	Surrey, Richmond	
				George Towers	Son	Unmarried	18		Labourer	Surrey, Richmond	
				Henry Towers	Son	Unmarried	16		Bricklayer	Surrey, Richmond	
				Edwin	Son	Unmarried	14			Surrey, Richmond	

102	3½	1	William R. Towers	Head	Married	42		Bricklayer	Middlesex , Chelsea
	[George St.]								
			Mercy Towers	Wife	Married		39		Surrey, Richmond
			William R. Towers	Son	Unmarried	20		Bricklayer	Surrey, Richmond
			George Towers	Son	Unmarried	18		Labourer	Surrey, Richmond
			Henry Towers	Son	Unmarried	16		Bricklayer	Surrey, Richmond
			Edwin Towers	Son	Unmarried	14			Surrey, Richmond
			Thomas Towers	Son	Unmarried	13		Scholar [Pupil]	Surrey, Richmond
			Jim H. Towers	Son	Unmarried	11		Scholar	Surrey, Richmond
			Arthur Towers	Son	Unmarried	9		Scholar	Surrey, Richmond

Source 4 : Census return 1901 (RG 13/483)

No. of Person	ROAD, STREET &c. and No. or NAME of HOUSE	HOUSES			Name and Surname of each Person	RELATION to Head of Family	Condition Marriage	Age last Birthday of	PROFESSION OR OCCUPATION	Employer, Worker, or Own account	If Working at Home	WHERE BORN	If (1) Deaf and Dumb (2) Blind (3) Lunatic (4) Imbecile, feeble-minded
		Uninhabited	In Habitation	Number of Rooms in House									
137	18	do	1		William R. Jones	Head	m	44	Boat-builder	Worker		Lacey Richmond	
					Louisa	Wife	m	40	Laundress	Worker		London	
					Louisa C.	Daughter	s	16	Laundress	Worker		Battersea	
					Thomas W.	Son	s	14	Household's Assistant	Worker		Wandsworth	
					Bertha C.	Daughter	s	12				do	
					Miriam V.	Daughter	s	11				do	
					Louisa J.	Daughter	s	9				do	
					Edwin C.	Son	s	4				do	
					Walter C.	Son	s	3				do	

Source 4 : Transcript of census return 1901 (RG 13/483)

Simplified Transcript

Number on census	Street, Number or Name of House	Houses	Number of Rooms if less than 5	Name and Last name of each person	Relation to Head of family	Married or not	Age of		Position or job	Boss, Worker, or Self-employed	If Working at Home	Where Born
		Lived in					Males	Females				

137	18 Flavell Rd	1	4	William R. Towers	Head	Married	41		Bricklayer	Worker		Surrey Richmond
				Louisa Towers	Wife	Married		40	Laundresses	Self-employed	At home	London Pimlico
				Louisa E. Towers	Daughter	Single		16	Laundresses	Worker		London Battersea
				Thomas W. Towers	Son		14		Green-grocers assistant			London Wandsworth
				Bertha B. Towers	Daughter			12				London Wandsworth
				Minnie V. Towers	Daughter			11				London Wandsworth
				Daisy G. Towers	Daughter			9				London Wandsworth
				Edwin C.	Son		7					London Wandsworth

				Towers							rth
				Walter F.	Son		3				London Wandswor rth
				Towers							

Full transcript

No. of Schedule	Road, Street, &c., and No. or Name of House	Houses	Number of Rooms occupied if less than 5	Name and Surname of each person	Relation to Head of family	Condition as to marriage	Age last birthday of		Profession or Occupation	Employer, Worker, or Own account	If Working at Home	Where Born
		Inhabited					Males	Females				

137	18 Flavell Rd	1	4	William R. Towers	Head	M	41		Bricklayer	Worker		Surrey Richmond
				Louisa Towers	Wife	M		40	Laundresses	Own account	At home	London Pimlico
				Louisa E. Towers	Daughter	S		16	Laundresses	Worker		London Battersea
				Thomas W. Towers	Son		14		Green-grocers assistant			London Wandswor rth
				Bertha B. Towers	Daughter			12				London Wandswor rth

				Minnie V. Towers	Daughter			11				London Wandswo rth
				Daisy G. Towers	Daughter			9				London Wandswo rth