

THE

NATIONAL

ARCHIVES



## Past pleasures

How did the Victorians have fun?

Key Stages 2-3 | Victorians 1850-1901

Lesson resource

# Introduction

During Queen Victoria's reign big changes took place in the way people spent their leisure time. Blood sports like bear baiting and cockfighting were banned. With the growth of the railways, people began to travel more and visiting the seaside became 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 1890s meant that a new dimension was added to theatre-going.

Use the posters, pictures and photographs in this lesson to understand how the Victorians enjoyed their leisure time.

## Suitable for:

KS 2-3

## Time period:

Victorians 1850-1901

## Connections to the Curriculum:

Key stage 1 & 2:

A study of an aspect or theme in British history that extends pupils' chronological knowledge beyond 1066

Changes in an aspect of social history, such as crime and punishment from the Anglo-Saxons to the present or leisure and entertainment in the 20th Century

Key stage 3:

Ideas, political power, industry and empire: Britain, 1745-1901: Britain as the first industrial nation – the impact on society

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## Teachers' notes

In this lesson, students use a range of posters and photographs to find out about Victorian leisure activities. These include posters for a menagerie, an illustration of a cycle race, photographs of Tottenham Hotspur, the Boxer Ching Hook and Gloucestershire Cricket Club with W. G. Grace seated at centre 1880. Also included is a picture showing filmed boxing-match presented in a theatre, and posters advertising a Grand Volunteer Tournament and Military Fete, a pantomime for Robinson Crusoe and Blackpool Health & pleasure resort.

Students can work in groups or pairs on the tasks. Teachers could also discuss with students which sources suggest that:

- Mass spectator sports 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?

As a whole class activity, students could also group printed versions of the sources into different types of leisure activity and discuss the similarities and differences with today.

The advertising posters in particular could also be used for extension work on persuasive writing in terms of discussion of their use of design and language. What do these posters reveal much about the Victorian period, beyond their tastes in leisure? You could supplement these with further from our collection of Victorian advertisements is aimed at any teacher or student engaged in a local study of the Victorian period. The sources could be used to help provide a sense of period and show pupils the type of source material they might find in their local archive, museum or record office. The collection could be used alongside our Victorian Lives collection to give further insight into the Victorian home life.

These adverts explore how the Victorians cleaned their homes, what they ate and drank, how they had fun, and how they advertised the products they sold.'

On the question of photographs with them the importance the background circumstances that produced it. This information can be gained from asking the following questions and be prepared to research further if necessary. Do not dismiss a photograph if it seems posed or if the caption has been changed or appears unlikely from your background knowledge. These elements can reveal information concerning the motives of the person or persons who changed/created it. A photograph is an 'interpretation' of an event or person, this does not reduce its value as evidence, but it has to be examined carefully.

- Is there an original caption or title?
- Do you have evidence in image of the date or time period?
- Where is the place? Can you see anything relating to the event, environment, architecture, time of day, or season?
- What is happening in the picture?
- If the image shows people: How are they dressed, are they be related or not?

## Teachers' notes

- What are they doing?
- What is the photographer trying to say with this photograph?
- Why has this picture been taken and whom is the audience?
- Is this photograph posed, cropped or revealing a certain perspective? [close up, panoramic, long shot, medium shot, landscape or portrait]
- What does the photograph not show from your own contextual knowledge?
- What other sources would help to understand the photograph?

## 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 4: Croquet on the lawn, 1872 (COPY 1/18 f.365)

Source 5a : COPY 1/450 – Tottenham Hotspur 1901

Source 5b : COPY 1/392 Boxer Ching Hook

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 189

Source 6c : COPY 1/76 f.133 – Robinson Crusoe 1886

Source 7 : COPY 1/88 f.593 – Blackpool Health & pleasure resort 1889



## 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 Barnum 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.

## External links

[Victorians at leisure](#)<sup>1</sup>

Webpage with information on Victorian leisure.

[Images by Theme: Victorian Leisure](#)<sup>2</sup>

Photographs from Historic England showing more Victorian leisure activities.

<sup>1</sup> <https://logicmgmt.com/1876/funandgames/leigrowth.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/education/images-by-theme/victorian-leisure>

## Tasks

### 1. Think about the kind of things you do in your spare time.

- Write a list of all the activities you take part in for fun in your spare time
- Now write a list of the things you think you might have done if you had lived in the Victorian era
- 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?

### 2. This is an advert for John Sanger and Sons Royal Hippodrome & Menagerie, a kind of travelling circus.

Source 1: John Sanger and Sons Royal Hippodrome & Menagerie, 1890. Catalogue ref: COPY 1/89 f.104

- Do you think this would have been a popular show, and explain why?
- Looking at the poster, what types of animals do you think you would have seen at this show?
- 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.

Source 2: Great Western Railway Collection Posters Taff Vale Railway Barnum & Bailey Circus at Cardiff, 21 June 1893. Catalogue ref: RAIL 1014/51

- If you had to choose to go to one of the shows, which one would you have chosen and why?
- Do you think the Barnum and Bailey circus was as large as the one shown in Source 1?

### 4. This is a picture of a ladies cycle race drawn around 1891.

Source 3: Cyclists, 1891. Catalogue ref: COPY 1/95 f.294

- Look at the bicycles the ladies are riding. How are these different from a modern bike?
- Compare what the ladies in the crowd are wearing with the ladies on the cycles. What are the main differences
- How easy do you think it would have been to ride these bicycles. Why?
- Why do you think the bicycle shown in this source was called a 'Penny Farthing'?

### 5. This is a photograph of people playing croquet in 1872.

Source 4: Croquet on the lawn, 1872. Catalogue ref: COPY 1/18 f.365

- Look at the way the ladies are dressed in this photograph, how is it different to the image in Source 3?

## Tasks

### 6. Look at these photographs of Victorian sporting pastimes.

Source 5a: Tottenham Hotspur 1901. Catalogue ref: COPY 1/450

Source 5b: Boxer Ching Hook. Catalogue ref: COPY 1/392

Source 5c: Gloucestershire Cricket Club W G Grace seated at centre 1880. Catalogue ref: COPY 1/50

- How many sports can you recognise?
- Do you notice any differences between the sports then and now?
- What kind of people do you think would have taken part in these sports?
- What kind of people would watch these sports?
- Do you think these were organised matches, or were they just local events? Why do you think that?
- Compare the photographs of these sporting events to the ones you see today, are they the same or different and how?

### 7. These are posters from three different performances the Victorians might have attended.

Source 6a: Filmed boxing match presented in theatre 1899. Catalogue ref: COPY 1/149 f.267

Source 6b: Grand Volunteer Tournament and Military Fete August 1896. Catalogue ref: COPY 1/128 f.84

Source 6c: Robinson Crusoe, 1886. Catalogue ref: COPY 1/76 f.133

- What type of people do you think might have gone to each of these performances?
- Look at Source 6a. What is unusual about what the people are doing?
- Look at how the people in the audience are dressed, what class of people do you think they might be?
- Look at Source 6b. How large an event do you think this would have been?
- Do you think it would have been popular? Why?
- Look at the uniforms of the people who will be involved. List all the different roles you can see
- Look at Source 6c. How similar do you think this pantomime would have been to one you would go and see today?
- Do you think you would be interested in the story from what you can see in the poster?
- Which of the three events would you most like to go and see. Why?

### 8. This is a poster advertising Blackpool from 1889.

Source 7: Blackpool Health & pleasure resort, 1889. Catalogue ref: COPY 1/88 f.593

- What kind of things would you have been able to do when you visited Blackpool?
- Do you think it was a popular resort. Why?



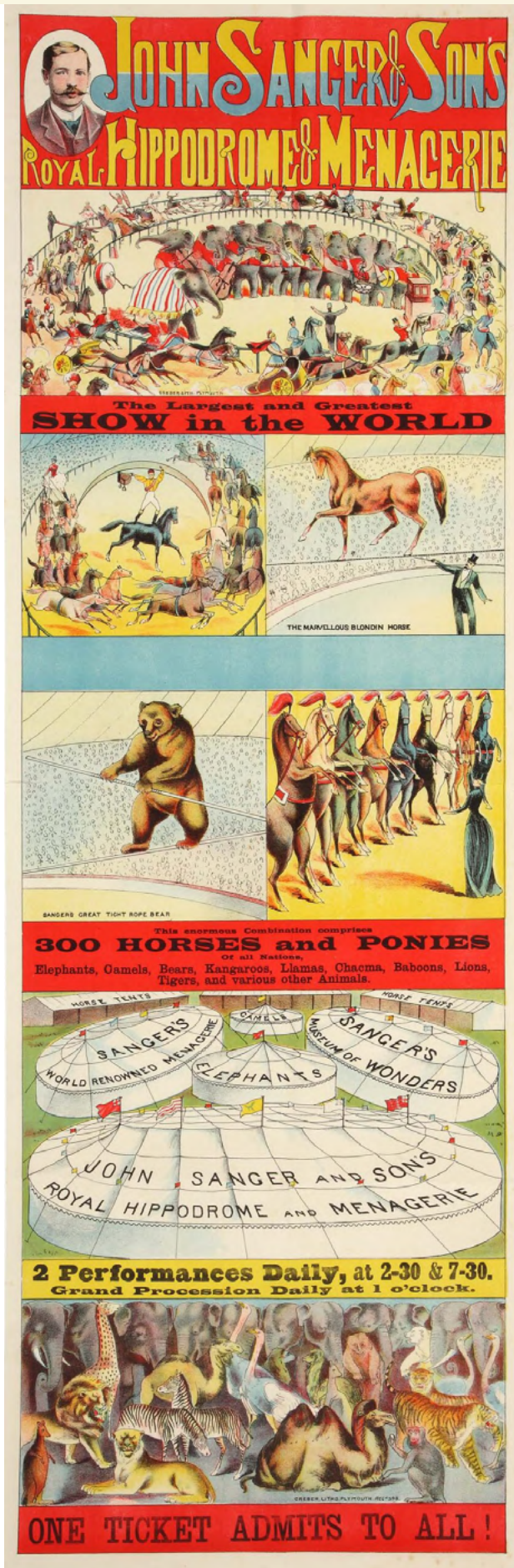
## Tasks

- 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.**

- Did men and women take part in the same activities?
- Do we spend our leisure time doing these things today. Give reasons for your answer
- What do these sources tell us about how Victorian men and women enjoyed themselves?
- Is there anything else we can find out about the Victorians from these sources?

Source 1: John Sanger and Sons Royal Hippodrome & Menagerie, 1890. Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/89 f.104



## Source 1: Transcript

John Sanger & Son's  
Royal Hippodrome & Menagerie

[Illustration of elephants playing musical instruments surrounded by horses with riders running in a circle.]

Largest and Greatest  
SHOW in the WORLD

[Illustration of horses running in a circle around an instructor standing on a horse's back in the middle.]

[Illustration of a horse on a tightrope in a circus tent.]  
THE MARVELLOUS BLONDIN HORSE

[Illustration of a bear holding a balancing bar walking a tightrope in a circus tent.]  
SANDER'S GREAT TIGHT ROPE BEAR

[Illustration of a row of horses on their hind legs in front of an instructor.]

This enormous Combination comprises

300 HORSES and PONIES

Elephants, Camels, Bears, Kangaroos, Llamas, Chacma, Baboons, Lions, Tigers, and various other Animals.

[Illustration of eight circus tents with different labels:]

Horse tents  
Horse tents  
Camels  
Sanger's World Renowned Menagerie  
Sanger's Museum of Wonders  
Elephants  
John Sanger and Son's Royal Hippodrome and Menagerie

2 Performances Daily, at 2:30 & 7:30.  
Grand procession Daily at 1 o'clock.

[Illustration of elephants, llamas, camels, ostriches, zebras, tigers, lions, monkeys, kangaroos, a giraffe, and a polar bear.]

ONE TICKET ADMITS TO ALL!



Source 2: Taff Vale railway Barnum & Bailey Circus, 21 June 1893.

Catalogue Ref: RAIL 1014/51

**TAFF VALE RAILWAY  
EXCURSIONS  
TO THE**

**BARNUM  
AND  
BAILEY**

**CREATEST SHOW ON EARTH**



NEW FEATURES, NEW ACTS,  
NEW PRODIGIES.  
GREATER LARGER & BETTER  
THAN EVER  
ONE TICKET ADMITS TO ALL  
ADVERTISED ATTRACTIONS  
EVERY AFTERNOON AT 2 EVERY NIGHT AT 8  
DOORS OPEN ONE HOUR PREVIOUS.

**CARDIFF,**  
**SOPHIA PARK** Recreation  
Grounds,  
4 DAYS ONLY, commencing  
**WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON, JUNE 21**

FREQUENT AND CONVENIENT SERVICE OF TRAINS for  
Visitors to the Show.  
For Particulars of CHEAP EXCURSION BOOKINGS see the  
Railway Company's Announcements.

— 21st June 1893 —

## Source 2: Transcript

Taff Vale Railway

Excursions to the

BARNUM AND BAILEY  
GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

New features, new acts, new prodigies, greater larger & better than ever

One ticket admits to add advertised attractions

Every afternoon at 2 every night at 8

Doors open one hour previous

CARDIFF, SOPHIA PARK Recreation Grounds,  
4 DAYS ONLY, commencing  
WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON, JUNE 21

FREQUENT AND CONVENIENT SERVICE OF TRAINS for Visitors to the Show.  
For Particulars of CHEAP EXCURSION BOOKING see the Railway Company's Announcements.



### Source 3: Cyclists, 1891.

Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/95 f.294





## Source 4: Croquet on the lawn, 1872.

Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/18 f.365



## Source 5a: Tottenham Hotspur 1901.

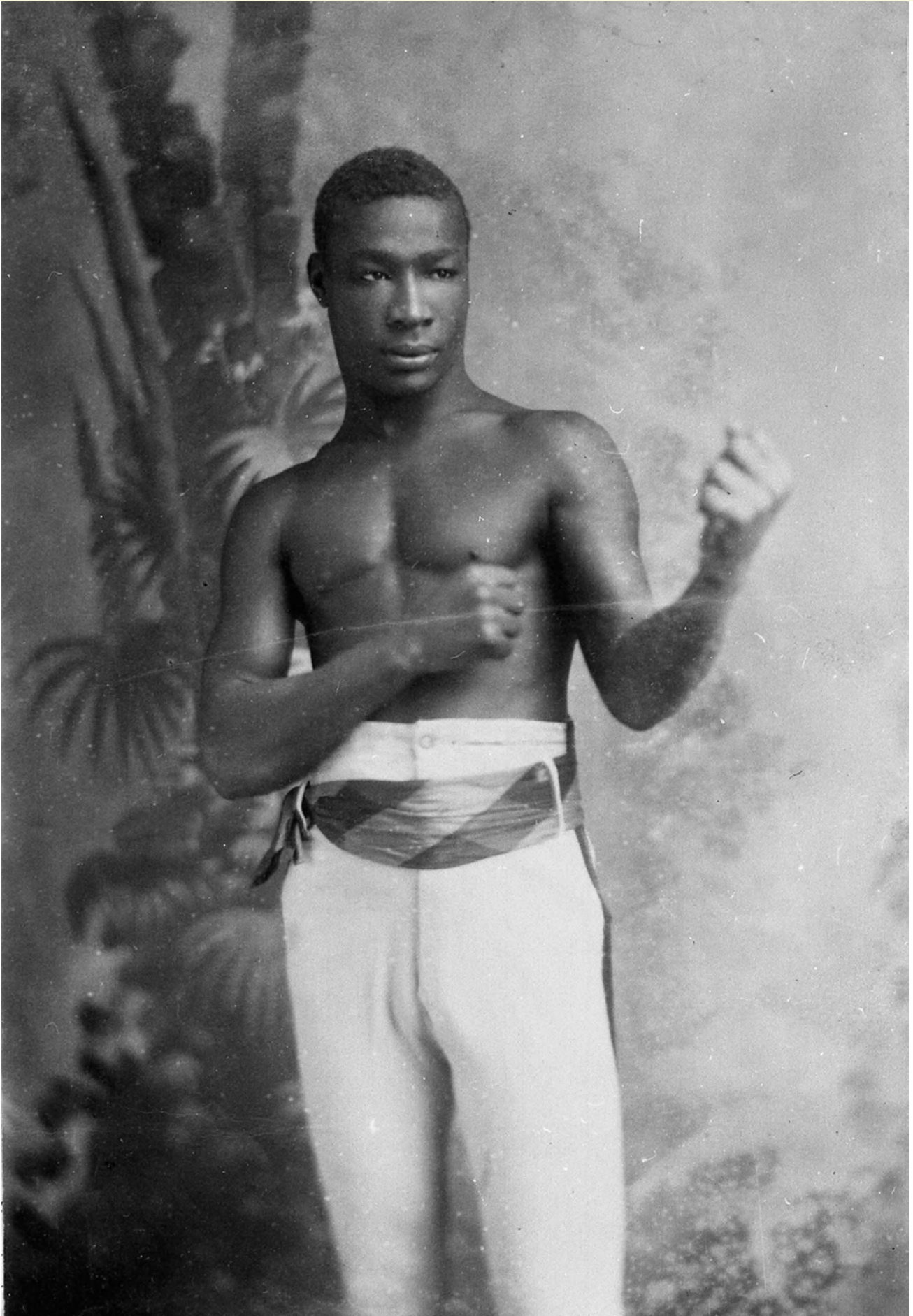
Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/450





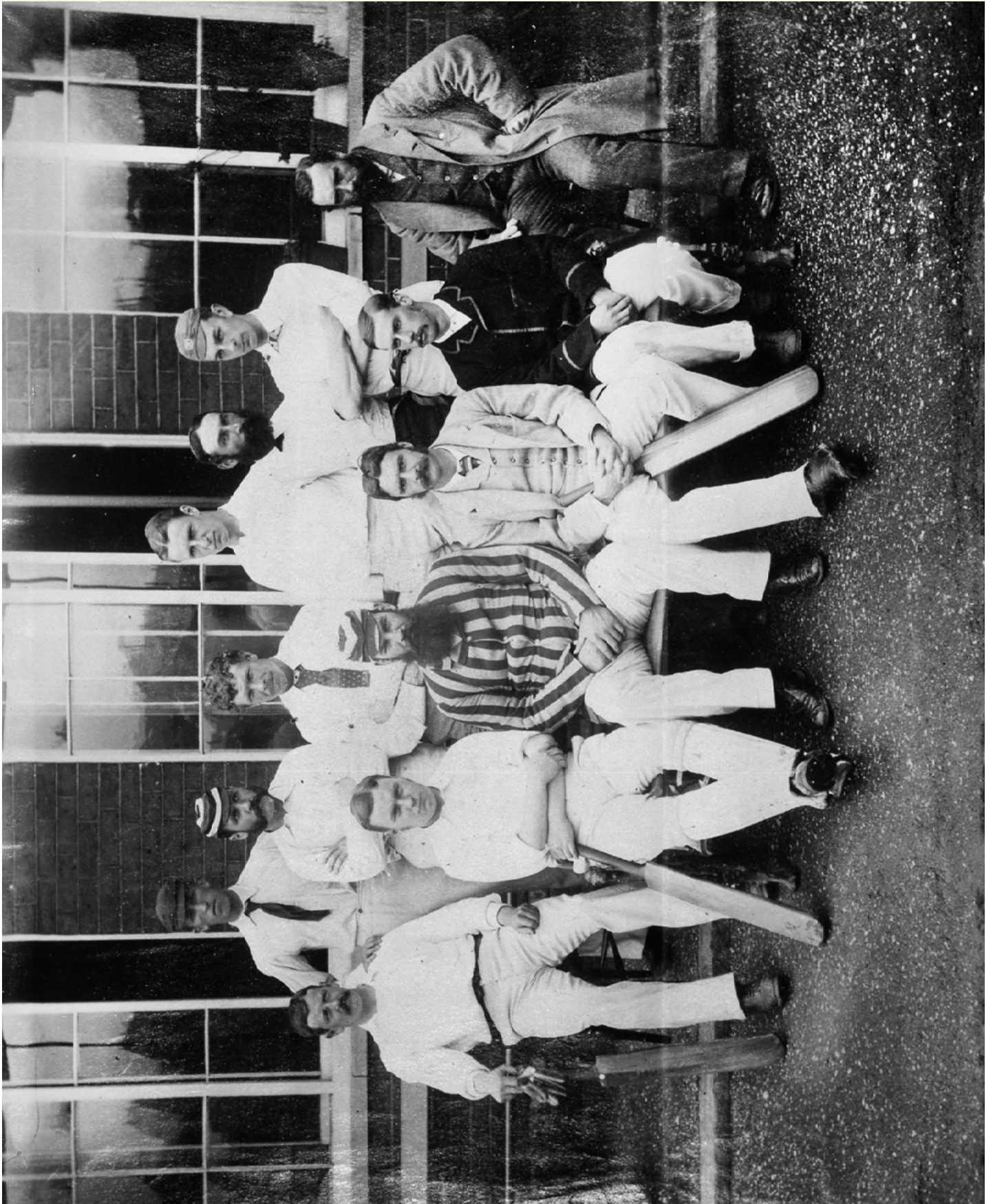
## Source 5b: Boxer Ching Hook.

Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/392





**Source 5c: Gloucestershire Cricket Club W G Grace seated at centre, 1880. Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/50**





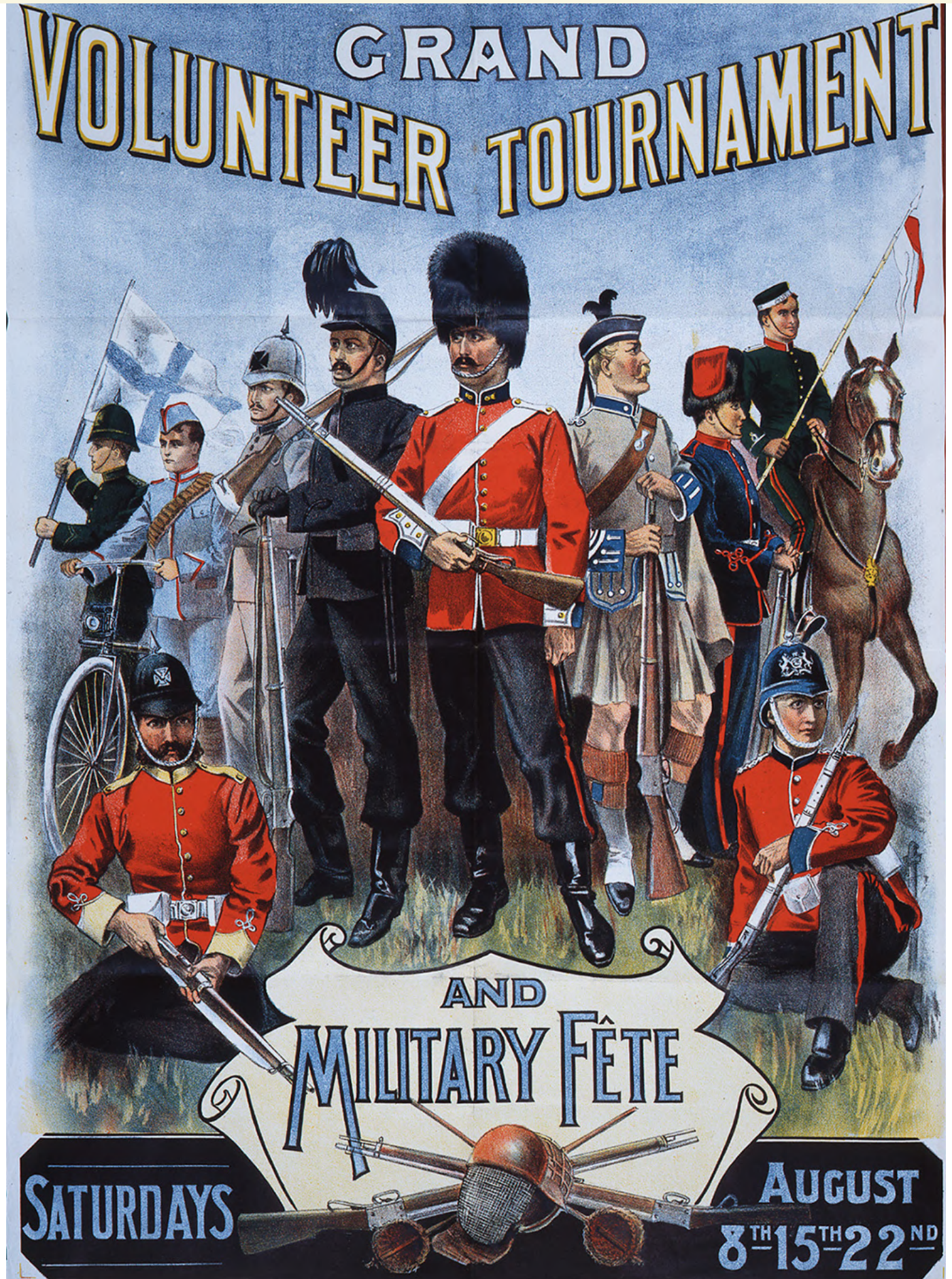
## Source 6a: Filmed boxing match presented in theatre, 1899

Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/149 f.267





Source 6b: Grand Volunteer Tournament and Military Fete, August 1896. Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/128 f.84





## Source 6b: Transcript

GRAND VOLUNTEER TOURNAMENT

AND MILITARY FÊTE

Saturdays August 8th-15th-22nd

## Source 6c: Robinson Crusoe, 1886

Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/76 f.133



## Source 6c: Transcript

GORGEIOUS PANTOMIME

Robinson Crusoe



## Source 7: Blackpool Health &amp; pleasure resort, 1889

Catalogue Ref: COPY 1/88 f.593

**BLACKPOOL**

PROGRESS

LANCASHIRE

**HEALTH & PLEASURE RESORT**

**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, situated 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 **Promenade** illuminated with the **Electric Light**.  
The **North and South Piers**.  
The **Winter Gardens, Pavillion, 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, Furness Abbey, Liverpool, Morecambe, Glaxo 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.

## Source 7: Transcript

BLACKPOOL

LANCASHIRE

HEALTH & PLEASURE RESORT

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, situated 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.

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The grand Open Sea and splendid Bathing Ground.

The new Electric Tramways on the Promenade.

The Promenade illuminated with the Electric Light.

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.

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## Why do our hyperlinks come with footnotes?

Our resources are designed to be printed and used in classrooms, which means hyperlinks aren't always accessible digitally. We include the full link at the bottom of the page so that you can type in the address without distracting from the main text of the lesson materials.

## Did you know?

The National Archives Education Service also offers free workshops onsite in Kew and online in your classroom.

Our [Onsite Workshops](#) are available for free here at The National Archives and allow students to experience genuine original documents reflecting over 1000 years of history. From Elizabeth I's signature to the telegrams of the sinking Titanic, students love the wow-factor of being able to see real history on the desk in front of them.

Our [Online Workshops](#) allow our Education Officers to teach through your projector, leading discussions and guiding students through activities based around original documents. All you need is a computer with a projector, webcam and microphone. We'll arrange a test call before your session to check the tech is working.

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