

## VICTORIAN ENGLAND AND ITS POLITICAL REFORMS.

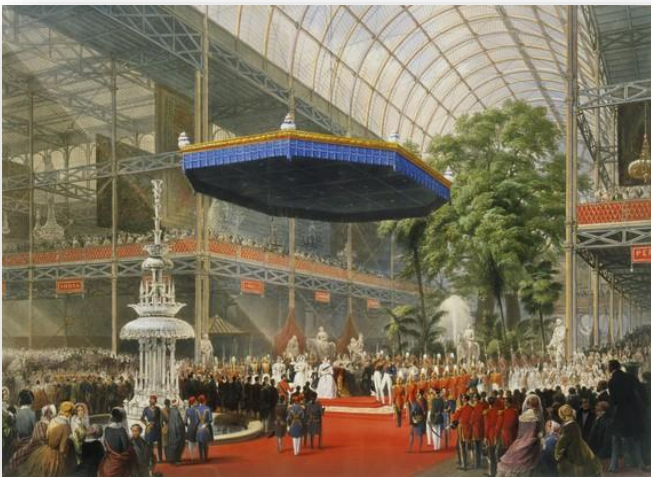
### Key Words and Related Topics:

- The Industrial Revolution
- The Age of Revolution (1789 – 1848)
- The British Empire
- The Chartist Movement
- The People's Charter

Temario de la Guía Docente: 5. Aspects of English National Identity: The Monarchy, the Protestant Reformation, and Liberalism. 6. The Anglican Church, the Monarchy and Parliament: their historical origin, their evolution and their cultural roles today. 7. The British Empire and the Origins of a Global, English-Speaking Culture. 8. Victorian England and its critics. 9. From the Political Reforms of the 19th Century to the Welfare State.

### Introduction:

To a large extent the history of the English nineteenth century in general, and of Victorian Britain in particular, is the history of gradual and moderate political reforms, which included the important extension of the franchise—among other reasons due to the pressure of revolutionary movements, in the rest of Europe, and at home of phenomena like the chartist movement. Important milestones in this aspect were the Reform Act of 1832. This reform of the political, electoral, and representative system responded to the profound changes that had taken place in England as a result of the growth in population and the rapid process of industrialization. These phenomena had drawn large masses of



*Queen Victoria inaugurates the Great Exhibition of 1851, in the newly built Crystal Palace (see below)*

population into cities like Birmingham, Manchester or Liverpool, which experienced a tremendous growth. After the Reform Act of 1832 another significant moment was the Chartist Petition of 1848, which also coincided with revolutionary movements in the rest of Europe: 1848 is an international milestone in what the historian Eric Hobsbawm called the Age of Revolution (which started in 1789 with the French Revolution, and ended in 1848).

During the nineteenth century Britain consolidated its World Empire, as it also became an industrial and technological powerhouse. After the defeat of Napoleonic France in 1815—its most serious international competitor at the time—Britain became the dominant political, military, and economic world power. This was demonstrated by the Great Exhibition of 1851, which became a showcase for the rest of the world to contemplate the technological and industrial prowess of the British Empire. The development of new technologies like the telegraph, or the railway

revolutionized communications and trade, as it also facilitated the spread of news, information of all sorts and also of ideas. The first intercity railway was significantly established in England, in 1830 between two of the most important industrial cities in the period, Liverpool and Manchester.

Of course, the whole period is symbolized by Queen Victoria, who lent her name to the era. She reigned between 1837 until her death in 1901. Today we associate the adjective Victorian with strict moral values, a stern code of sexual conduct, and stiff

social structures. Queen Victoria and her consort prince Albert, with their extended family, projected the image of a typical middle class family, which was used as a mirror for the rest of the ruling elites: these were the well-educated, middle and higher-middle classes that furnished the civil service that ran the empire, both at home and abroad. In this regard, Victorian Britain was a double-faced reality. There was a sharp contrast between the wealth and prosperity of its industry, technology and trade, and the squalor in the living conditions of the urban working masses—which gave birth to the socialist and communist movement, also around the significant year of 1848. The ostentatious pomp of Empire—displayed in architecture and the arts, for instance—with the paternalistic rhetoric employed by its ideologues—who saw the empire embarked in a benevolent, civilizing mission around the world—also provided a sharp contrast with the colonization, and exploitation of overseas resources and peoples in Africa, Asia, and the rest of the world.



*The interior of Crystal Palace, built for the Great Exhibition of 1851*

**TASK.** Read text number [1] and answer the following questions:

1. What is the historical significance of the French Revolution?
2. What is the contrast between the political turmoil and the changes caused by the French Revolution in France, and in the rest of Europe, on the one hand, and the evolution of events in England, on the other? How does the text explain this contrast?
3. How did the British elites view this contrast, and what—in their eyes—did it say about the nature of the British Empire?
4. How did the government of William Pitt the Younger react to political events in France during the revolution?
5. In unit 8 we already learned about the Peterloo Massacre? Can you explain what it was, and remind the rest of the class how a famous English poet reacted to it?
6. What sort of events took place between 1831 and 1832? Summarize and comment.



*Queen Victoria's coronation portrait*

## [1]

### A BRITISH REVOLUTION IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY?

By Professor Eric Evans

While the French Revolution of 1789 reconfigured the political contours of Europe, Britain seemed impervious to revolutionary change. But how exceptional was Britain? Eric Evans investigates.

No violent political revolution has occurred in Britain since the civil wars of 1642-51. Yet in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries virtually every other state in Europe has experienced at least one forcible overthrow of government and its replacement by another, from the French Revolution of 1789 to the Russian Revolution of 1917. Why was Britain different?

The fall of the Bastille prison in Paris on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1789 is a key event in European history. It

mobilized the beginning of a revolution in France, leading to the overthrow of the old regime and the execution of King Louis XVI, his wife and many leading members of the French aristocracy. Within a few years, as the new order struggled to assert itself, Napoleon Bonaparte emerged in France as one of the most extraordinary military and political leaders in history.

Under Napoleon's leadership, the French political, education and legal systems were fundamentally mobilized. Despite the reappearance – for a time – of the French monarchy, the Revolution reconfigured not only France but also the political contours of Europe as a whole. While the entire authority structure in France was overturned, the heady ideals of 'liberty, equality and fraternity' – proclaimed by the French revolutionaries and drawn from the European Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – seemed to offer a template for change across the whole of the continent, and beyond.

Britain, however, seemed impervious to revolutionary change. Though every other aspect of British life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was transformed by industrial, social and cultural development, the country's rulers seemed somehow to avoid the mistakes of their continental counterparts. When Britain was at the peak of its imperial power at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, historians charted the country's rise to greatness over the preceding hundred years or so. They were inclined to stress British genius for avoiding fundamental conflict between classes and social groups, and the country's ability to manage evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, political change.

On this analysis Britain's transformation was a major force for good. Its commercial and industrial revolutions offered the country's increasing population jobs and greater prosperity. In an age of widespread religious belief, many discerned the hand of God directing the progress of the British nation, first protecting it from invasion and then helping with its commercial and territorial expansion. In 1894, the famous imperial politician, Lord Curzon, could claim that Britain ruled, under God, over 'the greatest empire for good that the world has seen'.

But how exceptional was Britain? Did it avoid revolution by divine intervention, by good management and wise statesmanship – or simply by luck? Historians nowadays are far less likely to ascribe Britain's largely peaceful progress in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to divine intervention. Some have argued that the threat of violent revolution was indeed real and that Britain escaped it, not by the hand of God but by the skin of its teeth.

The French Revolution inspired reformers in Britain as much as it frightened the British Crown and landowning classes. It is worth remembering that the Hanoverian dynasty, which provided Britain with its monarchs from 1714 to 1901, was only rarely popular, and was frequently mobilized for its lack of understanding of the British people. Anti-government cartoons in the 1790s often included the most scabrous, even treasonable, representations of King George III.

In that decade, a number of political movements emerged to press for parliamentary reform. Some, like the London Corresponding Society, were mobilized and directed by skilled craftsmen and depended on the support of working people. They embraced political objectives drawn directly from French examples. They wanted to replace royal and aristocratic rule with representative government based on the *Rights of Man* – the influential political pamphlet by Thomas Paine.

The government of William Pitt the Younger, already at war with revolutionary France, was thoroughly alarmed by the prospect that revolutionary ideas might be exported to Britain, and it responded to these ideas with political repression. From 1794, radical political leaders could be arrested without trial. In 1795, during a period of high food prices and severe public agitation, stones were thrown at the King's carriage as he went to Westminster to open a new session of parliament. In the fevered atmosphere of the time, such actions could easily be interpreted as portending revolution. Within weeks, a parliament dominated by fearful landowners had passed legislation that redefined the law of treason, and that made it almost impossible to hold public meetings in support of reform.

Pitt's policies succeeded, at least on one level. Throughout the remainder of the wars with France, which went on until 1815, support for reform never again approached the heights of 1795. Support among all ranks in society for what was increasingly seen as a patriotic war also boosted the government. However, the most determined of the disaffected radicals were merely driven underground, and in the years 1796-1803 government spies found evidence of revolutionary conspiracy. (...)

Support for radical parliamentary reform never disappeared. During periods of economic turbulence, such as 1815-20 and during the so-called Reform Act crisis of 1829-32, masses of people could appear on the streets in support of either democracy or republicanism. The most famous such occasion was in August 1819 when a large crowd assembled at St Peter's Fields in central Manchester to hear a pro-reform speech from Henry 'Orator' Hunt, the most gifted radical speaker of his day. Fearing uncontrollable disorder, and perhaps even revolution, the Manchester authorities over-reacted. They sent in troops to disperse the crowd by force. Eleven people were killed and the radicals were given a huge propaganda boost by referring to the event as 'Peterloo', in a grim analogy with the Duke of Wellington's famous victory over Napoleon at Waterloo four years earlier.

During the European revolutionary wars of the 1790s British government propaganda could – just about – confect George III as the symbol of the nation. His eldest son, George, however, first as Prince Regent from 1810 and then as George IV from 1820 to 1830, provoked more contempt than respect. The early 19<sup>th</sup>-century monarchy was unable to inspire national unity. Indeed, it was part of the problem.

The claim that Britain came close to revolution in 1830-32 is by no means fanciful. Support for parliamentary reform reached unprecedented heights. 'Political unions' were formed in most large towns to press for radical change. The wife of the Russian ambassador wrote to her brother: 'We... in England, are just on the brink of a revolution.' In November 1830, the Duke of Wellington's Tory government was



*This 1819 political cartoon by George Cruickshank shows the alarm caused by the radicalism of the French Revolution, which triggered a series of strict measures by the British government intended to repress the activities of radical revolutionaries in England (like Thomas Paine).*



A cartoon representing the Peterloo Massacre by George Cruikshank, 1819. A crowd of 60,000 had gathered in St Peter's Fields, Manchester, to hear speeches supporting parliamentary reform. Eleven were killed and 400 injured after a charge.

forced to resign after the Duke had asserted – against mountainous evidence to the contrary – that the people of Britain still had confidence in the unreformed political system that ruled their lives.

### Parliamentary reform and the crisis in 1831-32

(...)

A general election held in 1831 gave the Whigs an unassailable majority for reform in the Commons but it did little to change opinion in the Lords, and the Lords' rejection of the Whigs' second reform bill in October led to widespread rioting throughout Britain. For a time, the authorities lost control of

Derby, Nottingham and Bristol. Castles and country houses were hastily reinforced against attack.

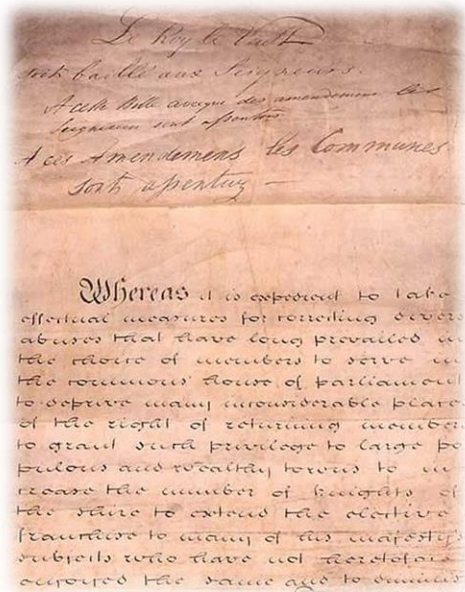
During the winter of 1831-32, the nation stood on a knife-edge. In the spring, the Lords showed signs of renewed recalcitrance, and the King, as a desperation measure, invited the Duke of Wellington back to form a government. In response, reform leaders made plans to bring the country to a halt by having their supporters withdraw funds from the banks, using the slogan: 'To stop the Duke, go for Gold'.

The crisis was averted. The Lords backed down and the Reform Bill was passed. But what if the Lords had stood firm? Historians will always debate 'might-have-beens' and no one can prove things one way or the other. However, the potential for revolution in 1831-32 is clear. Public support for parliamentary reform had never been greater. Outside London, no professional police force was in place and the mechanisms of control available to the authorities were old-fashioned and creaky. There was as yet no railway network to move troops rapidly to areas that were out of control. Revolutions have been mounted elsewhere on less.

The Whigs' perception that a measure of concession to popular opinion was necessary in the interests of national security was undoubtedly correct. But if they had not won over the King and the Lords in 1832, then the potential for a revolutionary response certainly existed. So, Britain avoided political revolution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it is far from clear that it was bound to do so. In 1831-32, to adapt a phrase used by the Duke of Wellington about the Battle of Waterloo, it had been a pretty 'near run thing'.

**TASK:** Read text [2] and answer the following questions.

1. What sort of social reforms were implemented as a result of the changes brought about by the process of industrialization and the growth of population?
2. What sort of changes took place in the press and in education?
3. Which series of reforms were introduced gradually? Why do you think they were gradual?



First page of the Reform Act of 1832, whose passing may have precluded the outbreak of a violent revolutionary movement in England

- What sort of effect did strategy for the implementation of reforms have?
4. Besides legal reforms promoted by parliament, there were individuals and associations that pushed for certain changes. Name two of them mentioned in the text, and describe the sort of changes that they promoted.
  5. What does the conclusion to the text say about tradition and change in the Victorian era? Paraphrase and comment.

## REFORMING ACTS

By Alexandra Briscoe

[2]

Parliamentary historians often refer to the Victorian period as the Age of Reform – a time when both pressure groups and individual philanthropists were particularly active.

The Victorian age has often been called ‘The Age of Reform’ and much of the legislation that passed through Parliament at the time, successful or unsuccessful, was aimed at reform, including bills relating to Parliament itself.

Distinctions came to be drawn between constitutional, political, economic and social reform bills. The last of these categories dealt with what were conceived of as ‘social problems’ or ‘social abuses’, many of which were associated with the growth of population and the development of capitalist industry, including health and factory acts. Initial reform bills were concerned with the hours and condition of factory children and women. One bitterly contested economic reform, the repeal of the corn laws in 1846, involved and affected the balance of social forces in the country – rural versus urban, agricultural versus industrial – but within a few years of repeal, the opposition to it had dwindled away.

Structures and processes changed. Early in Victoria’s reign mobilized political parties were beginning to take shape, and there was no totally independent civil service. Yet, by the end of the reign, ‘democracy’ was no longer a bogey word, political parties had a constituency as well as a Parliamentary base, and competition to enter the civil service (by examination) was taken for granted. The pattern of communications, physical and social, had also changed with the rise of a railway system. A new geography had effectively been created, and there was a different kind of popular Press. Long before the launching of the Daily Mail in 1896, press circulation had begun to increase after the abolition of stamp duties on newspapers in 1855, the result of sustained agitation. The National Education Act had also been passed, belatedly, in 1870, creating elementary schools financed from local rates. Attendance was made compulsory ten years later.

Whether the comprehensive title the ‘Age of Reform’ should refer to the whole period in British history between 1837 and 1901 – a period of sharp contrasts in place and time – raises other basic questions, pivoting on the relationships between ‘improvement’, ‘reform’ and ‘revolution’. As the fear of revolution in Britain receded after 1815, many ‘reformers’ claimed that only if particular reforms were carried in time could revolution be avoided. And almost all reformers agreed that ‘revolution’ was the best means of ‘reform’. The opponents of the Great Reform Bill claimed that it was ‘revolutionary’, but within two years of its passing in 1832 most of them accepted it as a fait accompli and adjusted their politics accordingly. It proved to be the first of four successful 19<sup>th</sup>-century reform bills, the second in 1867, the third introducing the ballot in 1872 and the fourth in 1885. There was more popular agitation, driven by economic as well as by political discontent, in the years 1830-1832 and in the years 1866-1867 than there was in 1885, when the Reform Bill was introduced, as the 1867 had been, by a Conservative government. Yet the 1885 Act had long-term radical consequences – mainly, the political opening up of villages through a rural electorate.

The individual most involved in a sequence of different social reforms was the evangelical Tory philanthropist Anthony Ashley Cooper, seventh Earl of Shaftesbury (1801-1885), who fought indomitably for the protection of children in factories and mines, and later chimney sweeps, for public health legislation and for the proper treatment of what were then called ‘lunatics’.

Other voluntary associations pressing for reforms were mobilized by women, like the Ladies' Sanitary Reform Association of Manchester and Salford, founded in 1862. Women were without the vote, but there were two women, in particular, who were as outstanding in influencing Parliament as Shaftesbury – Josephine Butler (1828-1906) and Octavia Hill (1838-1912). The former fought a long (and still controversial) battle to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869, which regulated women working in brothels. The Acts were totally repealed after a long agitation, which had international ramifications, in 1886. Octavia Hill, housing reformer, supported by John Ruskin, was more interested in voluntary than in state action. She wanted affordable working-class houses to become real 'homes'.



*Chartists meeting at Kennington Common in 1848*

The British emphasis on reform rather than revolution, the desire to adapt institutions rather than to destroy them, seemed a national asset in the nineteenth century, but in the last decades of the twentieth century many writers in the media, including some historians, claimed that by not having a revolution in the nineteenth century Britain had suffered. In particular, old values of deference survived. Old institutions, like Parliament, the key to much else, should have been totally transformed. Tradition was a brake on progress.

**TASK.** Read texts [3], [4], and [5] and answer the following questions:

1. What was the reaction of the establishment to the presentation of the 1848 petition? Why do you think they reacted like that?
2. What sort of reforms did the People's Charter propose? List and comment.
3. What did Karl Marx think about the People's Charter? Summarize and comment.

### THE CHARTIST MOVEMENT 1838 - 1848

By Steven Roberts

#### [3]

In 1848 the British establishment watched in horror as revolution swept across Europe. In London, Chartist leaders delivered a petition to Parliament asserting the rights of ordinary people. Dangerous radicals or proto-democrats? Stephen Roberts traces their story.

In the years 1839, 1842 and 1848, the Chartist Movement urged Parliament to adopt three great petitions. Of these, the best known is the final petition, with six million signatures, presented to Parliament on 10th April 1848 after a huge meeting on Kennington Common. This event achieved great prominence in the story of Chartism, due largely to the reaction of the authorities as they faced the challenges of that turbulent year.

The presentation of the petition came at a time of much violent change in Europe; Louis Philippe had been removed from the French throne in February 1848, and revolutions were soon to convulse other European

capitals. These events had given great heart to the Chartist leaders, although they were already much encouraged by the election to Parliament, in July 1847, of their most popular leader, Feargus O'Connor.

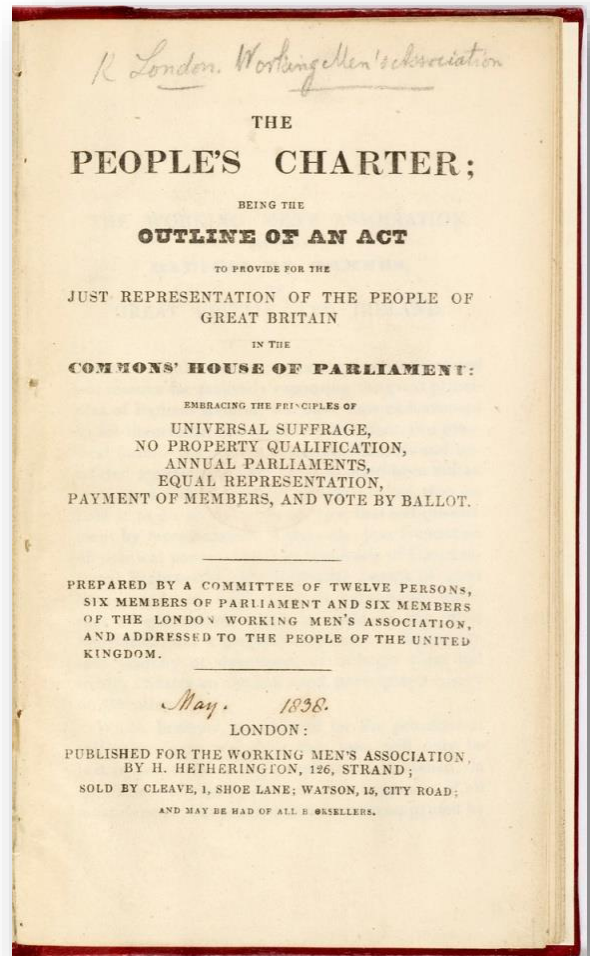
Working people had proclaimed themselves as Chartists at crowded meetings throughout March 1848. The authorities had viewed this campaign with great concern, and some of the propertied classes had come to believe that the Chartists intended revolution, even though the Movement's leaders always emphasized their commitment to peaceful protest. The government's concern led to Queen Victoria being dispatched to the Isle of Wight for her safety, and the Duke of Wellington - with thousands of soldiers and special constables - was brought in to defend London.

Chartists such as Thomas Clark, who had walked alongside the cabs carrying the petition, looked back on the events of 1848 with great pride. Their intentions had been peaceful; the aggressive militarisation of the capital had been unnecessary.

In the lead up to the events of 1848, the People's Charter was published - in May 1838 - as a draft parliamentary bill. It contained six points: manhood suffrage; the ballot; abolition of property qualifications for MPs; payment of MPs; equal electoral districts; and annual elections. Thousands of working people had rallied together on the basis of this charter, and hundreds of them had gone to prison for their beliefs.

William Lovett was instrumental in drawing up this new document of long-established radical demands. He had been an active metropolitan radical at the time of the Reform Bill crisis of 1831-2, when the middle class but not the working class had been admitted into the parliamentary system. This was seen as a betrayal of a large section of society, and created some of the resentment that led to Chartism.

The People's Charter was not enacted in the 1840s. In the short term Chartism failed, but it was a movement founded on an optimism that was eventually justified. It was a powerful assertion of the rights of working people, creating in them a long-term self-confidence and self-reliance. During the century after the end of the movement, most of the Chartist demands were passed into law, and undoubtedly the Chartist issues of democratic inclusion and the rights of citizenship remain highly relevant today.



#### THE PEOPLE'S CHARTER (1838)

(Source: <http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/21cc/struggle/chartists1/historicalsources/source4/peoplescharter.html>)

#### [4]

This document, written in 1838 mainly by William Lovett of the London Working Men's Association, stated the ideological basis of the Chartist movement. The People's Charter detailed the six key points that the Chartists believed were necessary to reform the electoral system and thus alleviate the suffering of the working classes – these were:

#### **Universal suffrage (the right to vote)**

When the Charter was written in 1838, only 18 per cent of the adult-male population of Britain could vote (before 1832 just 10 per cent could vote). The Charter proposed that the vote be extended to all adult males over the age of 21, apart from those convicted of a felony or declared insane.



### **No property qualification**

When this document was written, potential members of Parliament needed to own property of a particular value. This prevented the vast majority of the population from standing for election. By removing the requirement of a property qualification, candidates for elections would no longer have to be selected from the upper classes.

### **Annual parliaments**

A government could retain power as long as there was a majority of support. This made it very difficult to replace a bad or unpopular government.

### **Equal representation**

The 1832 Reform Act had abolished the worst excesses of 'pocket boroughs'. A pocket borough was a parliamentary constituency owned by a single patron who controlled voting rights and could nominate the two members who were to represent the borough in Parliament. In some of these constituencies as few as six people could elect two members of Parliament. There were still great differences between constituencies, particularly in the industrial north where there were relatively few MPs compared to rural areas.

The Chartists proposed the division of the United Kingdom into 300 electoral districts, each containing an equal number of inhabitants, with no more than one representative from each district to sit in Parliament.

### **Payment of members**

MPs were not paid for the job they did. As the vast majority of people required income from their jobs to be able to live, this meant that only people with considerable personal wealth could afford to become MPs. The Charter proposed that MPs were paid an annual salary of £500.

### **Vote by secret ballot**

Voting at the time was done in public using a 'show of hands' at the 'hustings' (a temporary, public platform from which candidates for parliament were nominated). Landlords or employers could therefore see how their tenants or employees were voting and could intimidate them and influence their decisions. Voting was not made secret until 1871.

The Charter was launched in Glasgow in May 1838, at a meeting attended by an estimated 150,000 people. Presented as a popular-style Magna Carta, it rapidly gained support across the country and its supporters became known as the Chartists. A petition, populated at Chartist meetings across Britain, was brought to London in May 1839, for Thomas Attwood to present to Parliament. It boasted 1,280,958 signatures, yet Parliament voted not to consider it. However, the Chartists continued to campaign for the six points of the Charter for many years to come, and produced two more petitions to Parliament.

### **KARL MARX ON THE PEOPLE'S CHARTER**

An excerpt of an article published in the *New-York Daily Tribune*, on August 25 1852

(Source: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/08/25.htm>)

### **[5]**

“We now come to the **Chartists**, the politically active portion of the British *working class*. The six points of the Charter which they contend for contain nothing but the demand of Universal Suffrage, and of the conditions without which *Universal Suffrage* would be illusory for the working class; such as the ballot, payment of members, annual general elections. But Universal Suffrage is the equivalent for political power for the working class of England, where the proletariat forms the large majority of the population, where, in a long, though underground civil war, it has gained a clear consciousness of its position as a class, and where even the rural districts know no longer any peasants, but only landlords, industrial capitalists (farmers) and hired laborers. The carrying of Universal Suffrage in England would, therefore, be a far more socialistic measure than anything which has been honored with that name on the Continent. Its inevitable result, here, is *the political supremacy of the working class*.”

## THE VICTORIAN ERA AND THE INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The first of these two texts is a paragraph taken from a very interesting text by Frederick Engels, a close collaborator of Karl Marx, and one of the founders of communism. Although the text as a whole is a detailed and devastating critique of the English political system, and its constitution, the opening paragraph summarizes the sort of international reputation that England enjoyed in the middle of the nineteenth century.

**TASK.** Read text [6] and [7] and answer the following questions:

1. Summarize Engels' opinion of the British Empire. How does this text agree with the history we have studied so far? Summarize and compare
2. Compare, and comment, what texts [6] and [7] say about the political structure of England at the time.
3. Which opinions are expressed by text [7] about the British Empire? List and comment the positive and the negative aspects
4. What does text [7] say about industrialization and the growth of cities? Which were the effects of these processes? Which measures were proposed and implemented to mitigate the negative effects of industrialization?
5. What does text [7] mean by expressions like 'civic identity' and 'civic engagement'?

### [6]

From *The English Constitution*

By Frederick Engels

First published in *Vorwärts!* (Paris) No. 75 (September 18, 1844)

(Source: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/condition-england/ch02.htm>)

"The position of England has hitherto seemed enviable to all other nations of Europe, and indeed so it is to anyone who dwells on the surface and observes simply with the eyes of a politician. Britain is an empire of such a kind as is possible today, and such as all other empires in essence were as well; for the empires of Alexander and Caesar too represented, like the British, the rule of civilised nations over barbarians and colonies. No other country in the world can measure up to England in terms of power and wealth, and this power and wealth do not lie in the hands of a single despot, as was the case in Rome, but belong to the educated part of the nation. The fear of despotism and the struggle against the power of the Crown came to an end a hundred years ago; England is undeniably the freest, in other words, the least unfree, country in the world, not excepting North America, and the educated Englishman consequently has about him a degree



*The First Meeting of the House of Commons after the Reform Act of 1832*

of innate independence such as no Frenchman, to say nothing of German, can boast of. The political activity, the free press, the maritime supremacy and the colossal industry of England have so fully developed the energy inherent in the national character, the combination of the most resolute force and the calmest deliberation, in almost every individual that in this respect too the continental nations trail infinitely far behind the English. The history of the British Army and Navy is a series of brilliant victories, whilst England has scarcely seen an enemy on its shores for the past eight hundred years; the stature of its literature can only be rivalled by the literature of ancient Greece and

Germany; England has produced at least two great names – Bacon and Locke – in philosophy, and innumerable ones in the empirical sciences, and if it is a question of which nation has *done* most, no one can deny that the English are that nation.”

[7]

FROM: OVERVIEW: VICTORIAN BRITAIN, 1837 - 1901

By Professor Eric Evans

Source: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/overview\\_victorians\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/victorians/overview_victorians_01.shtml)

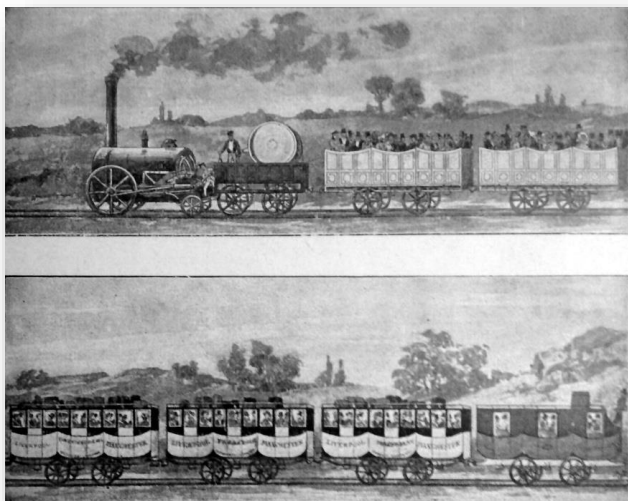
In 1882 Britain was in the later stages of acquiring the largest empire the world had ever seen. By the end of Victoria's reign, the British empire extended over about one-fifth of the earth's surface and almost a quarter of the world's population at least theoretically owed allegiance to the 'queen empress'.

It would be a gross exaggeration to claim, as many contemporaries did, that those living in a British colony felt privileged to be ruled by a people anxious to spread the virtues of an ordered, advanced and politically sophisticated Christian nation to those 'lesser breeds' previously 'without the law'. That said, there is no gainsaying the fact that both many colonial administrators and Christian missionaries took on their colonial duties with a fierce determination to do good. Britain's status as the financial capital of the world also secured investment inflows which preserved its immense prosperity.

Victoria came to the throne during the early, frenetic phase of the world's first industrial revolution. Industrialisation brought with it new markets, a consumer boom and greater prosperity for most of the propertied classes. It also brought rapid, and sometimes chaotic change as towns and cities expanded at a pace which precluded orderly growth. Desperately poor housing conditions, long working hours, the ravages of infectious disease and premature death were the inevitable consequence.



*Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, in a photograph that portrays them as a typical higher-middle class family*



*First passenger railway between Liverpool and Manchester, 1825*

The Victorians wrestled with this schizoid legacy of industrialism. The Victorian town symbolised Britain's progress and world pre-eminence, but it also witnessed some of the most deprived people, and depraved habits, in the civilised world. Taming, and then improving, Britain's teeming cities presented a huge challenge. Mortality data revealed that, in the poorer quarters of Britain's larger cities, almost one child in five born alive in the 1830s and 1840s had died by the age of five. Polluted water and damp housing were the main causes. Death rates in Britain as a whole remained obstinately above 20 per thousand until the 1880s and only dropped to 17 by the end of Victoria's reign. Life expectancy at birth, in the high 30s in 1837, had crept up to 48 by 1901. One of the great scourges of the age - tuberculosis - remained unconquered, claiming between 60,000 and 70,000 lives in each decade of Victoria's reign.

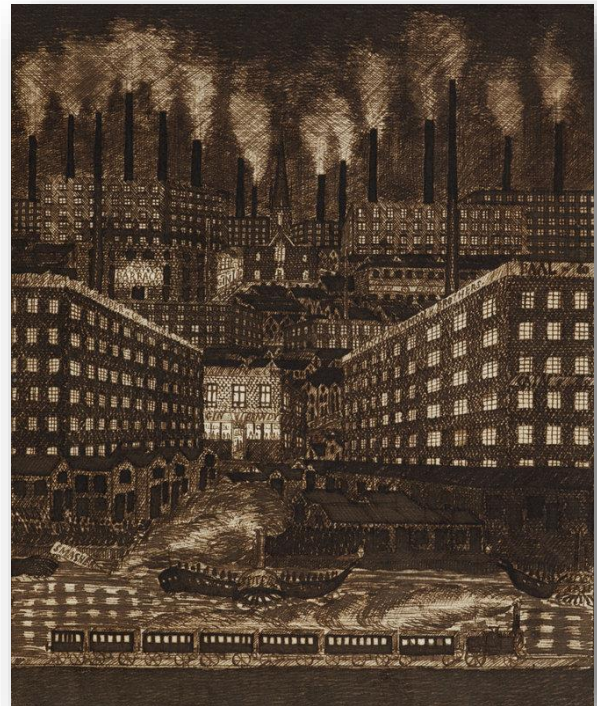


*Crystal Palace, exterior. Built for the Great Exhibition of 1851*

The Victorian era saw considerable expenditure on monuments to civic pride. The competitive ethic which drove so much business enterprise was channelled by local worthies into spending on opulent town halls and other civic buildings. By no means all of these were intended for the use of a propertied elite. Libraries, wash-houses and swimming baths were all funded as part of a determination to provide working people with the means to improve themselves. Civic identity and civic engagement were more powerful forces in Victorian than in early 20th-century Britain. Nor were the Victorian middle and upper classes parsimonious over charitable giving. The 1860s alone saw the formation of the Society for the Relief of Distress, the Peabody Trust, Barnardo's Homes and the Charity Organisation Society. These national organisations were multiplied several-fold by local charities. Christian gentlemen considered it a duty to make legacies to worthy causes. True, much of this giving came with strings. Most Victorian charities were aimed at those sections of the working classes disposed towards helping themselves. Its overall impact, however, should not be underestimated.

What, finally, of the Victorian political structure? It is easy to see that it was far from democratic. At the beginning of Victoria's reign, about a fifth of adult males were entitled to vote. That proportion increased, through parliamentary reform acts passed in 1867 and 1884, to one-third and two-thirds respectively. No women could legally vote in parliamentary elections until almost 18 years after Victoria's death - and the queen herself was no suffragist. Women did, however, play an increasingly influential role both in locally-elected school and poor law boards and in local government from the 1870s onwards.

If not democratic, the political system was becoming increasingly representative. By 1901, few argued - as had frequently been asserted against the Chartists in the 1830s and 1840s - that to allow working men to vote would be to cede power to an ignorant, insensate and unworthy majority. Victorian politicians increasingly learned how to 'trust the people'. They also noted how many among 'lower orders' could



*Ernest Jones, 1848. A Northern English Town*

help themselves economically while improving themselves educationally.

The quality of political debate in Victorian Britain, in newspapers and in both houses of parliament, was also very high. The struggle for political supremacy between William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli in the late 1860s and 1870s represents perhaps the most sophisticated political duel in the nation's history. During the Victorian era, then, the United Kingdom could plausibly be considered as the world's superpower. However, Germany and the United States had already begun to surpass its industrial capacity and Germany's naval build-up would shortly present a powerful challenge to long-held British supremacy. On the home front, the nation was only beginning to get to grips with widespread poverty while considerably more than half the adult population remained without a vote. Victorian supremacy by 1901 was only skin deep.