



THE VICTORIAN AGE

The reign of Queen Victoria. Queen Victoria's reign lasted sixty-four years, the longest in British history. When she came to the throne in 1837, she was an eighteen-year-old girl. By the time she died in 1901, she had influenced every aspect of British life. Between her coronation and her death, Victoria saw Britain change beyond recognition. During her reign the British Empire extended to the far corners of the globe. Industry sprawled its smoky cities over Britain and the population trebled. Modern politics was born; religion came under attack; and the worship of progress became almost a new creed.

Queen Victoria reigned, she did not rule. The constitutional monarchy was firmly established. The House of Commons became the real ruling power and the Prime Minister the leader of the country, responsible for the politics of the time. Power had passed from the crown into the hands of the politicians, and the people.

Victoria's influence on her people was direct. In her simplicity and honesty, in her devotion to her husband, Prince Albert, and her nine children, she set the tone for the nation. When she died, Archbishop Temple paid her a simple but meaningful tribute: «She was a good woman».

The early years of the Victorian Era. The early years of the Victorian Era were marked by social distress, economic upheavals and various political conflicts. The Industrial Revolution had still left its effects and many problems remained unsolved. The Reform Bill of 1832 had granted the right to vote only to those who had property qualifications, while the working class had no political representation. The discontent of the people manifested itself in the Chartist Movement of 1837, led by the Irishman Feargus O'Connor. It was named «Chartism» after the People's Charter, petition drawn up in 1838, which had over one million signatures demanding universal male suffrage, voting by secret ballot, annual elections, abolition of property qualifications for the members of Parliament, payment of the members of Parliament, and equal electoral districts. The movement capitalized on the restlessness of the poor, made wild by hunger and misery: the «hungry forties», with a tragic famine devastating Ireland, and thousands of people emigrating to the States where the Gold Rush to California had just begun, were among the saddest periods in British history.

In 1839 Parliament rejected the Charter out of hand, and that gave rise to a series of riots and disorders. Two subsequent petitions in 1842 and 1848 were dismissed as well.

After 1848 Chartism lost credibility; it declined because of its weakness in leadership and lack of tactics, but its aims were to be achieved later and the movement also paved the way to the future «Trade Unions Organization».

A contemporary movement to Chartism was the Anti-Corn-Law League (1838). It aimed at the repeal of the Corn Laws, passed in 1815 as a protective measure against the import of corn from foreign countries. The Laws kept the price of British corn high and secured stability and profits to farmers and landowners. As a result bread was so expensive that the poorest people could not afford to buy other farm products.

The Anti-Corn-Law League was a movement which reflected one of the main trends of the time towards the liberalization of trade. According to the laissez faire theory of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), the State's interference in economic affairs should be reduced to the minimum in order to promote through free activity and competition the fullest development of trade and general welfare.

After years of unrest the Corn Laws were repealed in 1846, under Sir Robert Peel's office, a Tory minister; at the same time duties on other articles were diminished or abolished. As an alternative source of revenue, Peel imposed an income tax, transferring the burden from trade to ordinary citizen, and this was a first step towards a more even distribution of wealth.

Robert Peel also founded London's Metropolitan Police (a British policeman is still referred to as a «bobby», which is the diminutive form of the name «Robert»).

A Public Health Act in 1848 tried to provide some remedies for the appalling sanitary conditions of the slums in factory towns and throughout the country.

The second half of the century. The Victorian Age was a period of great change and in particular the second half of the century. British trade increased remarkably, technical progress took enormous steps forward, big railways were built, and the first great ocean liners appeared. The building of the London Underground, the introduction of piped water and gas, and the Great Exhibition of 1851 were all objects of Victorian pride. England became the workshop of the world. The positive results achieved in the economic and in the technological fields, and the high degree of industrialization contributed to create the mood of complacency and confidence which was typical of the Victorian Age.

The last forty years of the century, Britain's political life was considerably influenced by the turn-taking of Whigs and Tories, now called Liberals and Conservatives, as the party of government. The Liberals (Palmerston, Gladstone) were generally more innovative and in favour of reforms at home, the Conservatives (Disraeli, Salisbury) more interested in expansion abroad.





In 1854, during the premiership of the Whig Lord Palmerston, the country was involved in the Crimean War (1854-1856), to preserve a balance of power in Europe. The Russians who aimed at exerting their control over the Black Sea, under the pretext of defending the Holy Places and the Christian minority, had invaded the decadent Turkish Empire. The war ended with the capture of Sebastopol in 1855. By the Treaty of Paris of the following year, the Turkish Empire was pitched together, and the Russians were forbidden to build harbours along the coast of the Black Sea. The Crimean War was the first to be fully reported in the «daily Press» by a group of war correspondents. This greatly helped the diffusion of the masscirculation of newspapers which both informed and created public opinion. The Crimean War was also the occasion for the activity of the first nurses, led by Florence Nightingale, the Lady with the Lamp. In spite of heroic episodes, such as the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava, the mismanagement of the war appeared quite evident.

The crisis became sharper in 1857 with the Sepoys' revolt, when in India, the «sepoys» (native Indian soldiers) employed by the East India Company, after a fierce massacre, captured the city of Delhi. The mutiny was quelled with difficulty in 1858, and the government of the country was assumed by the British Crown. In spite of a reduction in its powers, the East India Company survived until 1873, the year of its abolition. Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India in 1876.

The American Secession War (or American Civil War, 1861-1865), which broke out between the Southern and Northern States of America, affected the English economy: cotton, so important for the textile industry, could no longer be imported from America; the problem was partially solved by growing cotton in India and Egypt.

Upon Palmerston's death in 1865, William Ewart Gladstone took his place; he served four times as Prime Minister during the years 1868-1874, 1880-1885, 1886, 1892-1894. Benjamin Disraeli was Prime Minister twice, in 1867-1868 and in the years 1874-1880. Many social reforms were introduced in the country.

It was under Disraeli that the Second Reform Bill was passed in 1867, giving the vote to most town-dwellers and artisans. Even if the electorate was almost doubled, it left part of the working class still without a vote. Under Gladstone – the great supporter of Home Rule for Ireland – religious tests were abolished; in 1870 the Educational Act was passed, by which a system of compulsory education was introduced, and voting became secret (1872).

Going back to his office, Disraeli continued the programme of reforms by passing the Employers and Workmen Act and the Trade

Union Act in 1875. In foreign policy, he tried to consolidate the vast colonial empire, and keep the British prestige abroad high. By this time England bought shares from the Khedive of Egypt, which gave her a certain control of the Canal of Suez.

In the General Election of 1880 the Liberals gained supremacy, Gladstone was again Prime Minister and was confronted with a series of international crises.

In 1880 the First Boers' War (1880-1881) broke out. The rising of Boers, descendants of the Dutch settlers, took place in South Africa and ended with the defeat of the British Army and the recognition of the independence of the Republic of the Transvaal.

The Third Reform Bill (1884) was passed, by which every man over twenty-one with a fixed home was enfranchised.

The last part of the 19th century is usually remembered as the Age of Imperialism. Though all great European nations had acquired vast colonial empires, none of them could compete with the British economic power.

In 1886 the conquest of Sudan increased the English possessions. However a serious political issue emerged in the Irish question: the Irish people had never completely accepted the Union Act and had always fought to obtain a certain degree of independence. In the first half of the 19th century they had organized themselves under the leadership of Daniel O'Connor to gain Home Rule, a kind of selfgovernment which did not completely separate Ireland from England. In the second half of the century, Irish claims manifested themselves in two movements: the Sinn Féin Party, that carried out a sort of guerrilla movement both in Ireland and England; and the official movement, led by Charles Stuart Parnell. Gladstone was convinced that only by granting Ireland a certain measure of self-government could the links between the two countries be preserved. In 1886 and 1893 he presented two Home Rule Bills, but they were rejected and the question remained unsolved till 1914.

The Conservatives held the office almost uninterruptedly from 1886 to 1905, firstly by Lord Salisbury and then by Arthur Balfour.





Behind the surface of economic progress and general welfare, the distribution of wealth was uneven and social conflicts and problems still persisted. On the international scene, the English supremacy began to be threatened by the competition of other arising powers. The last years of Victoria's reign were marked by the rise of movements of dissension, such as the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (1884), one of the first labour organizations, and the Fabian Society which was composed of middle-class intellectuals.

A second conflict with the Boers (1899-1902) proved to be more brutal than the first, and the pretext was the refusal of the President of the Transvaal (Paul Kruger) of political rights to the British immigrants (Uitlanders). The cause was that the British wanted to regain control of the huge gold reserves of the country indeed. At the end of the war the Transvaal and Orange Free States were annexed to the British Empire.

Towards the end of the century the British Empire expanded more and more to include Egypt, the Suez Canal and, after the South African War ended, the Boer States. At Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 and her Diamond Jubilee in 1897 there were tremendous celebrations in her honour, as a symbol of endurance and progress. Among the countries within British control, in one way or other, were Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India, thousands of small islands in the Atlantic, Caribbean, Pacific and Indian Oceans, plus the African settlements. On that empire «the sun never set», so widely were its possessions scattered.

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF EVENTS

1837-1901 Reign of Queen Victoria: 1837 → Queen Victoria ascends the throne; 1838 → People's Charter and beginning of Chartism; Anti-Corn-Law League; 1840 → Queen Victoria gets married to Prince Albert; 1841 → Peels becomes Prime Minister; 1846 → Corn Laws repeals; 1848 → Gold Rush to California; Public Health Act; End of Chartism; 1850 → Death of Peel; 1851 → London's Great Exhibition; 1853 → The Turkish Sultan declares war on Russia; 1854 → Beginning of the Crimean War during the premiership of the Whig Lord Palmerston; 1855 → Capture of Sebastopol; 1856 → Treaty of Paris and end of the Crimean War; 1857 → Sepoy's revolt in India; 1861 → Beginning of the American Civil War; 1865 → President Lincoln assassinated; End of the American Civil War; Palmerston's death; 1867 → Disraeli is Prime Minister; Second Reform Bill; 1870 → Under Gladstone, Educational Act is passed; 1872 → Voting becomes secret; 1873 → Abolition of the East India Company; 1875 → Employers and Workmen Act; Trade Union Act; 1876 → Queen Victoria becomes Empress of India; 1880-1881 → Liberals gains supremacy; First Boers' War; 1884 → Third Reform Bill; The Democratic Federation is transformed into the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), adopting an explicitly socialist platform; The Fabian Society is founded; 1886 → First Irish Home Rule Bill; Conquest of Sudan; British Empire is established in India, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Africa, Egypt; 1887 → Victoria's Golden Jubilee; 1893 → Second Irish Home Rule Bill; 1897 → Victoria's Diamond Jubilee; 1899 → Outbreak of the Second Boers' War; 1900 → British Labour Party is created for the General Election; 1901 → Death of Queen Victoria; Her son Edward VII succeeds her.

