

# BLENHEIM SQUARE

## LOCAL STUDY: URBAN SPACES

### VICTORIAN BRITAIN



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*See 'Introduction and Lesson 1' for the background to these lessons. The challenge was to bring the history of a local urban square to life and give the children an insight into life there in Victorian times.*

#### **The lessons**

- 1 Victorian Leeds and Blenheim Square
- 2 Visiting Blenheim Square
- 3 **Census work: Who lived in Blenheim Square in 1881?**
- 4 Story-telling: living in a 19th-century house
- 5 Role play: upstairs, downstairs
- 6 Thinking about the future

#### **Lesson 3 Census work: Who lived in Blenheim Square in 1881?**

In this lesson we reviewed our findings about what the Square is like now. Then we found out who lived there in 1881, and compared this with a poor area of Leeds. Children also filled in their own census return.

#### **Resources for Lesson 3:**

Handwritten copies from 1851 Leeds census, Back George's Street, one sheet per pair of children (obtained from Leeds Local History Library).

Blank census forms, one per child.

Copies of 1881 census for Blenheim Square, one per child.

Photographs of the houses on the Square, taken in Lesson 2.

#### **Episode 1**

*Focus: Reviewing discoveries.*

I had had prints and a CD of the children's photographs made, and brought in a laptop and data projector, hoping to project several of the Square photographs to use as a focus for a whole-class discussion. The technology played up, however, and we couldn't project clear enough pictures for the discussion. Thank goodness for the prints! We gave each child the photographs of his/her own house, and used these as the basis for pooled observations.

Next we compared now and then: what features of the houses might have changed from the past?

The children's answers:

There are more people living there now - some doors have two or three letterboxes.

Most door handles are modern now, like ours. They used to have round ones - knobs.

Some of the railings have changed [outside the houses] - some are new. (I asked: 'How do you know?' Answer: 'The design looks modern, and they're not rusty.')

There is modern paving now in the Square.

Most windows have modern/plastic frames - not wood.

There used to be railings on the boundary wall. We can still see where they were. (Here I explained about the need for scrap metal during World War II.)

The houses in the top terrace (built in the 1890s) are in a bad condition. My house has got boards over all the windows.

There are two modern square brick buildings - what are they? (Electric sub-stations, marked as El Sub Sta on the map.)

Some of the doors are new - they're flat, and mine has a spy-hole.

On the old maps the Square has got more plants and trees and two paths across it. Now there are only a few trees and one path and some flowers in one corner.

## **Episode 2**

*Focus: Introducing the census.*

Last week we looked at the Square in the present: now to turn to our second question: What was Blenheim Square like in the past? What kinds of people lived in Blenheim Square 125 years ago, in 1881? We can find out from census returns.

We asked the class if they knew what a census was, and several of the children could tell us. We explained further, telling them why censuses are taken, when they began in Britain (in 1801) and how often they are taken (every 10 years).

Nowadays we receive printed forms, but in the 19th century a census enumerator visited each house and wrote down who was present in longhand. This was partly because many people could not write.

Victorian handwriting was far more elaborate than ours: do you think you can read the handwriting on a census form from 1851, 155 years ago? The children's interest quickened in the face of the challenge.

### **Episode 3**

*Focus: Examining handwritten sheets from the 1851 census from a different area of Leeds.*

We handed round pages from the Leeds census of 1851, from Back George's Street, a poor area of Leeds. Carefully we went through the headings, explaining what they all meant. Then we asked the children to look hard for clues as to what kind of people lived in this street. We prompted them to look particularly at the number of people in each house, the occupation/s of the inhabitants, where they were born.

The children did very well deciphering the smudgy copies and curly handwriting. They were amazed at how many people had been born in Ireland (I told them briefly about the potato famine and the resulting emigration to America and England by desperate people – the ethnic minority immigrants of their day). The children noticed that most of the street's inhabitants were poor, having occupations such as labourer, hawker, piece worker.

### **Episode 4**

*Focus: Filling in our own census entries.*

Now we asked the children to fill out their own census returns, working on the principle that doing their own would ensure thorough understanding of both process and content.

We gave out blank 'census' forms, using the 19th century census headings, and told the children to fill them in for the previous night: to record all the people who were present in their house that night.

The class worked on their census returns for the next 10 minutes. These were kept private to each individual child.

Reflection: I did not give them enough time for this – I should have let the children take them home and bring them back after the weekend, though parents would have needed reassurance about what would be done with the document.

### **Episode 5**

*Focus: Examining the 1881 census for Blenheim Square.*

Now to look at what the census can tell us about who lived in Blenheim Square 125 years ago, in 1881.

Unfortunately, by 1881 only one of the planned three terraces had been built (the second was constructed in the 1890s and the third was never built at all). So, every child whose house was in the second terrace

teamed up with someone with numbers 1-15 (first terrace) and they worked as a pair.

We gave out copies of the 1881 census, one per pair. We also distributed the ever-valuable highlighters and asked the children to highlight ‘their’ house and its occupants. Who lived in their house? How many in the family? What did they do? Were they similar to or different from the inner-city people in the 1851 census?

A good discussion followed. We pooled and recorded on the flipchart the occupations of the inhabitants of the Square in 1881. They made for interesting reading:

Linen draper	Woollen merchant
Woollen manufacturer	Bookbinder
Woollen draper	Hatter
Articled clerk	Solicitor
Registrar	Wesleyan minister
Undergraduate	Certified schoolmistress
Law student	Music and French teacher
Manager of engineering works	Bombay assistant-accountant general

I was delighted to find that the children had at least some idea what these occupations were. We discussed them and compared them with the occupations of the inhabitants of Back George’s Street. Blenheim Square was definitely a middle-class address!

The children also noticed that:

- Every house had at least one servant, and many had two.
- Four women were heads of their households.
- Most of the women who were not servants didn’t work.
- Some houses held large families: including servants, a house could hold up to 13 people.

During the following week the class brought the Victorian maps of the Square to life, using collage to recreate the gardens in vivid colour.

### **Leeds Urban Spaces project**

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Thank you to the staff and pupils of Blenheim Primary School, Leeds, particularly Steve Boothroyd the Head teacher and Dawn Lowry the year 6 class teacher.

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