

# 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 4**

#### **Story-telling: living in a 19th-century house**

In the three previous lessons we have looked at the development of Blenheim Square and investigated what it 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.

Lessons 4 and 5 both lasted all morning. Today we brought the census to life - essential preparation for the role play next week. Our aim was to give the class some insights into past people's lives and attitudes, and to be able to understand the perspectives of both middle-class house-owners and working-class servants.

#### **Resources for Lesson 4:**

Video: BBC Landmarks: Victorian Britain 3 'Home life' (includes details about a day in the life of a housemaid).

Extract from Mrs Beeton's Household Management (1907 edition): *The duties of the housemaid*, one per child. See <http://www.mrsbeeton.com/>

A selection of topic books about life in Victorian Britain.

Victorian-style clothing for adult story-teller

**Episode 1**

*Focus: Telling a story in role.*

We began with a middle-class resident of the Square. I had constructed a story based on the census record for Number 2, Blenheim Square, fleshing out the bare bones of the information given. The key parts of the 1881 census record for the family are:

Surname	First name	Relationship	Status	Age	Sex	Occupation	Birth state
Walley	Samuel	Head	M	49	M	Wool merchant	England
Walley	Mary Annie	Wife	M	26	F		England
Walley	Sydney	Son	U	8	M		England
Walley	Fredrick	Son	U	7	M		England
Walley	Alice	Daughter	U	5	F		England
Walley	Annie	Daughter	U	1	F		England
Walley	John	Son	U	0.3	M		England
Walley	Sarah	Sister	U	36	F		England
McKane	Rebecca	Servant	U	19	F	Gen. servant	Ireland
Hopson	Margaret	Servant	U	12	F	Gen. servant	England

I told a story as Mary Annie Walley, wife of Samuel. She was already, at 26, the mother of five children. To look the part, I wore a long skirt, high-necked blouse and shawl and tied my hair back. In role, I gushed about my darling husband Samuel, how hard he worked, the clothes and jewellery he bought me and how well he provided for the family. Then I brought in my problem: Rebecca, our Irish servant. Lately she'd been slow at her work, dropping and breaking things and coughing constantly.

'Last week she fainted after running up the stairs to attend to my baby, little John. Well! What use is a servant who can't carry out her duties properly? She does look dreadful, though: pale and thin – and that cough! I fear she has consumption. If she has, she'll grow weaker and weaker and become even less able to work properly. I can't be expected to pay for a doctor for her – no, there's no help for it, I can't keep her. Margaret, our other servant, is only a girl of 12, and she can't do the heavy work yet. I'll have to dismiss Rebecca and get another servant. I can't do without two good domestics, what with this house and my five children to be looked after. Rebecca can go and live with her sisters; I know she has two working in Liverpool. They are the right people to care for her. I don't see how I can do it.' (The story was more detailed than this, but the flavour is there.)

The children listened fascinated, though they certainly didn't like Mrs Walley much.

## Episode 2

*Focus: A domestic servant's life (video)*

In the early days of the National Curriculum several good television programmes were made for history. The BBC's Landmarks video about Victorian Britain contains a programme about the life of a domestic servant and a working-class family.

We told the children that now we were going to look at life from the perspective of the poor. We asked them to concentrate particularly on the domestic servant's story, as the servants living in Blenheim Square would probably have led similar lives. We also explained that domestic service was the major form of employment in Victorian Britain: approximately 1.25 million people worked as domestic servants.

We watched the video sequence, then asked the class what they had learnt about life in Victorian times, from both Mrs Walley's story and the video. We pooled and recorded their observations on the flipchart. They were particularly struck by the servants' constant running up and down the stairs, the hand-sewing, the odd kitchen utensils, and the lack of electricity.

## Episode 3

*Focus: Documentary evidence – the work of a housemaid.*

We told the class: 'We can compare what we saw in the video with instructions for servants that a Victorian woman, Mrs Isabella Beeton, wrote.'

Mrs Beeton wrote pages and pages about the duties of various servants. We have copied for you just one page taken from her instructions. It tells us what a housemaid had to do in the early morning, up until the end of breakfast.

We gave each child the extract: *The duties of the housemaid*. I read it aloud, acting out the chores as I read them. The children followed on their copies.

Now we asked the children, in pairs, to highlight all the jobs the housemaid had to do by the end of breakfast. They set to; the highlighters were constantly in use, the children exclaiming all the while at the work demanded. When they had finished, we asked them to tell us all the tasks the housemaid had to carry out. We wrote their contributions on the flipchart. By the time they stopped, the list filled the entire sheet.

The children now had perspectives from both upstairs and downstairs to build on.

## Episode 4

*Focus: Setting up the role play.*

We announced that next week we were going to become some of the people who lived in Blenheim Square in 1881. Half the class will be house owners or members of the family, the other half will be servants. The residents of the Square are going to have tea in the Square, and their servants will prepare it for them.

We stressed that every child must have a real identity, taken from the 1881 census. A hiccup was: there were more boys than girls in the class, yet all the servants in Blenheim Square in 1881 were female, as were four of the Heads of Household. Fortunately, Ahmed and Shaquille volunteered to become female servants.

We asked the children to think hard about their characters, and what kind of person they were. I had brought in a set of Victorian topic books for the children to consult in researching their roles. The school also had a decent collection of Victorian books.

I left, promising to bring in costumes and the goods for the tea party.

*Running the tea party: see lesson 5.*

### **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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