

# BLENHEIM SQUARE

## LOCAL STUDY: URBAN SPACES

### VICTORIAN BRITAIN



---

*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 5 Role play: upstairs, downstairs**

This lesson took all morning – not even break-time interrupted the Blenheim tea party.

##### **Resources for Lesson 5:**

Set of Victorian mob caps, long skirts, smocks, cravats/scarves, waistcoats, trousers, jackets – hired from Ilkley Playhouse.

Crockery, trays and cutlery for providing tea and sandwiches for 12 people (no modern designs – try for the Victorian look).

Ingredients for tea and cucumber sandwiches: cucumbers, butter, white bread, vinegar, tea, milk, white sugar.

Twelve copies of a Victorian Family Temperance Pledge. Available from: <http://2eyougottagetitgoing.blogspot.com/> (Scroll down to May 18, 2006 and click on the Pledge image to enlarge it for printing).

During the week the children chose their roles from the 1881 census. Dawn, their teacher, ensured that there was an even number of servants and house-owners. Drawing on what they had learnt from Mrs Walley's story, the video, Mrs Beeton and the topic books, they wrote individual character statements (see examples of children's work).

The day before the role play, I picked up the costume items I had arranged to hire from the wonderful little playhouse in Ilkley.

We had hoped to have the tea party outdoors in the authentic setting of the Square. However, the school did not want to expose the children to possible mockery or verbal abuse by locals, some of whom were involved in drugs, and to whom some of the children were known. So we decided to imagine we were out in the Square and hold the tea party in the school hall instead. This arrangement made food preparation easier too.

### **Episode 1**

*Focus: Setting up the role play.*

Dawn the teacher and I laid out the equipment and costumes for the tea party. Dawn was to be Cook, in charge of the making of tea and sandwiches ‘downstairs’.

When thinking about the role play, I had realised that the servants would have plenty to do, making and serving the tea. The problem was how to occupy the middle-class residents. Kelly’s street directory for Blenheim Square showed that one of the residents, Mr Tudor George Trevor, was listed as the organising secretary of the Church of England Temperance Society. This gave me both a subject and a purpose for the tea party. I also knew from the Archery Club records that developers were negotiating to buy the archery ground adjacent to the Square and put up crowded terraces of small houses.

Across the road from Blenheim Square is the local Anglican Church, so I decided to take the role of the vicar’s wife, who had asked the Square’s residents to her tea party. Needless to say, she was cast as a temperance enthusiast. Her aim was to persuade all the residents and their servants to sign the temperance pledge. I had searched the internet and found a family temperance pledge. I printed off 12 copies, and brought them along.

In class, we reminded the children to take care of the costumes, then lined them up to receive their jackets, trousers and cravats (male residents); smart skirts, shawls or smocks (female residents); or mob caps, drab long skirts and smocks (servants).

### **Episode 2**

*Focus: Role play – a Victorian tea party, with temperance.*

We all trooped into the school hall, where Dawn had arranged two long tables: one for the kitchen table, the other for the tea party.

She whipped the servants off to the ‘kitchen’ to make dainty cucumber sandwiches with the cucumber slices soaked in vinegar, and the bread crusts cut off. They filled the two teapots from the boiler, laid the trays and brought them to the table. Cook reminded them to serve only from the left, as decreed by the great and good Mrs Beeton. Meanwhile, as the vicar’s wife I welcomed my guests and launched into a diatribe about the dangers of alcohol. The residents played up well; all signed a pledge

and induced their servants to sign too. We also had a lively discussion about the proposed sale and development of the archery ground next the square. We became proper NIMBYs at the prospect of losing our spacious outlook to small crowded terraced houses. The residents fell with ease into giving orders to their servants, and telling them off for any slip-ups. George even threatened his poor servant with instant dismissal when she served him from the right, instead of the left. The servants kept their self-control beautifully, never answering back, and curtsying with eyes down when they spoke.

I'm ashamed to say that the residents at the tea party ate everything – all that was left for the servants were the bread crusts. They also had to clear up after us. They came back to class hungry and grumbling. It was a telling lesson in the difference between upstairs and downstairs.

### **Episode 3**

*Focus: Insights from the role play.*

When all the children were back in their own clothes, still buzzing, we asked: 'Do you think you felt what it might have been like to have lived or worked in Blenheim Square?' Nods all round.

Memuna: 'It was hard work being a servant, and they bossed us around all the time. We got no rest!'

It's easy to sympathise with the servants, who had no power. What about those who were richer – the residents?

George: 'It was nice having all those servants, Miss.'

I asked: 'Having all that power over someone else, did that change the way you behaved? Did you become a nastier person?'

We were rewarded by some thoughtful, sober nods. Something for Dawn to pursue in PSHE.

#### **Leeds Urban Spaces project**

**Author of this unit:** Jacqui Dean

© Jacqui Dean 2006

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.

downloaded from the Nuffield Primary History website  
[www.primaryhistory.org](http://www.primaryhistory.org)