

The Weird and Wonderful World of Victorian Britain



Poverty in Victorian London

In the 19th century, rapid changes in employment, housing and social welfare brought about a huge change in people's lives. The period of adjustment led to many workers living in extreme poverty and even dying on city streets of starvation in Victorian times. The population of Great Britain actually trebled during the 19th century. People were living longer, having larger families, infant mortality was down and immigrants escaping from the potato famine in Ireland all added up to a huge population explosion in Victorian times.

Employment

Most employment was to be found in the newly industrialized cities, so many people abandoned their rural roots and converged on the urbanized areas to seek work. Skilled and unskilled workers alike were paid subsistence level wages. If the work was seasonal or demand slumped, when they were laid off they had no savings to live on until the next job opportunity could be found. Poor Victorians would put children to work at an early age, or even turn them out onto the streets to fend for themselves. In 1848 an estimated 30,000 homeless, filthy children lived on the streets of London.

Boys became chimney sweeps, worked the narrow shafts in coal mines or were employed beneath noisy weaving looms retrieving cotton bobbins. Others would shine shoes or sell matches to earn a crust.

People working long hours in Victorian times had to live close to their employment and available housing became scarce and highly priced. Tenants would themselves let their rooms for 2d to 4d a day to other workers to meet the rent. Hideously overcrowded, unsanitary slums developed, particularly in London. They were known as rookeries

Sanitation

Streets would have a flowing foul-water ditch into which the sewers and drains emptied. In some cases, this was the only source of drinking water too.

As well as disease, these miserable Victorian poor suffered starvation and destitution. In many cases their only choice was to turn to crime - another major problem in the cities.

It became clear to many that something had to be done about poverty in Victorian England, but there were opposing thoughts and opinions. The sheer scale of the problem must have seemed overwhelming to even the most well-meaning benefactor.

In an article published on 24th September 1849, journalist Henry Mayhew, described a London Street with a tidal ditch running through it, into which drains and sewers emptied. The ditch contained the only water the people in the street had to drink, and it was 'the colour of strong green tea', in fact it was 'more like watery mud than muddy water'. This is the report he gave:

'As we gazed in horror at it, we saw drains and sewers emptying their filthy contents into it; we saw a whole tier of doorless privies in the open road, common to men and women built over it; we heard bucket after bucket of filth splash into it'.

Mayhew's articles were later published in a book called *London Labour and the London Poor* and in the introduction he wrote:

'...the condition of a class of people whose misery, ignorance, and vice, amidst all the immense wealth and great knowledge of "the first city in the world", is, to say the very least, a national disgrace to us' (3).

Housing

Low wages and the scramble for jobs meant that people needed to live near to where work was available. Time taken walking to and from work would extend an already long day beyond endurance. Consequently, available housing became scarce and therefore expensive, resulting in extremely overcrowded conditions. All these problems were magnified in London where the population grew at a record rate. Large houses were turned into flats and tenements and the landlords who owned them, were not concerned about the upkeep or the condition of these dwellings.

In his book *The Victorian underworld*, Kellow Chesney gives a graphic description of the conditions in which many were living: 'Hideous slums, some of them acres wide, some no more than crannies of obscure misery, make up a substantial part of the, metropolis ... In big, once handsome houses, thirty or more people of all ages may inhabit a single room,'

Ragged Schools

Some Victorians thought that education was the answer and ragged schools were set up to provide basic education. Others argued that crime was not caused by illiteracy; it was just encouraging a more skilful set of criminals! Others still thought that any money given to the poor was simply squandered on drink and gambling and did not solve the underlying social problems at all.

The Role of Government

In the early 19th century government was very much smaller than it is now. It was believed that government should only have a limited role in raising taxes and defending the realm. Governments operated a policy of 'Laissez Faire' which means 'leave alone'. This summed up how government and ordinary people saw the role of government. They believed that government should stay out of the everyday lives of the people.

The educated and wealthier people who lived in Britain in 1890 may have been interested in poverty, but they had no clear idea as to the extent of poverty. For the Victorian British however the reasons for poverty were very clear. It was a person's own doing that led them into poverty.

Society's attitude towards the poor

During the 19th century people had strong beliefs about the causes of poverty.

People believed that it was a person's own doing that they were impoverished.

They believed that it was due to their own behaviour, laziness, alcoholism or wasting the money that they had. For some it was just the natural order of things. Some people were just more superior than others.

A common Victorian attitude was that "the poor were improvident, they wasted any money they had on drink and gambling". It was a common belief during the Victorian times that government should be small and should seldom intervene in the lives of ordinary people. If poverty struck, then it was the person's own fault and not the responsibility of Government.

Extract from 'The Plight of Climbing Boys', 1818

Dr. Lushington is heard in support of the Bill. WILLIAM COOPER is then called in, and examined as follows by Dr. Lushington:

Are you a chimney sweeper by trade? - Yes.

Were you an apprentice to the trade? - Yes.

At what age were you apprenticed? - I was ten years old; they said I was nine; that was what my father told me; he put me down so.

Do you remember being taught to climb chimneys? - Yes.

What did you feel upon the first attempt to climb a chimney? - The first chimney I went up, they told me there was some plum-pudding and money up at the top of it, and that is the way they enticed me up; and when I got up, I would not let the other boy get from under me to get at it, I thought he would get it; I could not get up, and shoved the pot and half the chimney down into the yard.

Did you experience any inconvenience to your knees, or your elbows? - Yes, the skin was off my knees and elbows too, in climbing up the new chimneys they forced me up.

How did they force you up? - When I got up, I cried out about my sore knees.

Were you beat or compelled to go up by any violent means? - Yes, when I went to a narrow chimney, if I could not do it, I dare not go home; when I used to come down, my master would well beat me with the brush; and not only my master, but when we used to go with the journeymen, if we could not do it, they used to hit us three or four times with the brush.

How long was it, according to the best of your recollection, that the skin upon your knees and elbows continued to be sore, when you first began to learn? - I suppose about a Month before they thoroughly got well at all.

Were you under the necessity of climbing the chimneys while in that state? - Yes, I climbed them, and I climbed the chimneys with a great swelling on my knees, which came of itself.

Is it usual to teach Boys to climb by means of blows or threats, when they first begin? - Yes, nothing else, and enticing them up by money; and if they will not go with being enticed up, they beat them, and force them to go up.

Beat them with a stick? - No, a brush; they have not a stick with them; some of them carry a piece of twisted cord, twisted round like a cat-of-nine-tails.

Do they call it a cat in the Trade? - Yes, it is known by that name.

That is applied with some severity to the boys sometimes, is it? - Yes, I went the other day down to Marybone Court, to Mr. Wright's, who buys my soot off me; I went down into the cellar to talk to him; the other boy says, George has not swept out the cellar; he did no more, than brought out this piece of cord, and cut the boy shockingly; he is not above eight or nine years old.

How long ago is that? - About a month ago; he began to halloo out, and the master said not a word more about it.

Do you know how the boys are generally treated along with the Chimney Sweepers? - Yes, many of them let out for what they call going out a queering, to those men that go hawking about the streets, calling "Sweep for the soot."

How are they lodged in general? - Very badly indeed in some places; in other places, they are very well.

For the most Part are they ill or well lodged? - Very bad indeed; some have no more than one blanket, some a bit of straw, and some a few sacks to lie on.

Where do they generally lie? - In the cellar, and up in the loft.

When they sleep in the Cellar, is the soot put into the same Place? - Yes, always.

What sort of clothing are they generally allowed? - According to the masters; some masters use the boys pretty well as to giving them clothes, other masters altogether keep them months and months before they are washed to the skin.

During the Winter-time, when the Boys go out on their Duty, have they Shoes and Stockings? - If I go out with a journeyman in the morning, if I have got bad chilblains, and if I cannot get on fast enough, I must off with my shoes, or they will knock me down with their hand, and I must run through the snow without shoes, which I have done many times.

How often are they washed? - Sometimes every week, sometimes every fortnight, and sometimes not more than once a year. A great many masters if they have got a new suit of clothes for them, the mistresses, to get a drop of anything to drink, will go and pawn the clothes; and then when Sunday comes, "My man, you must have a dose of physic, you are not well;" and so they do not want their clothes.

Do you know of the boys being subject to any accidents? - Yes, I have known one at Temple Bar: I came myself, and went up to him, but it was too late; the boy was lost through a woman forcing him up, it was his mistress; he was not thoroughly learned, and he stuck himself in, and it was the death of him; it was up Devereux Court, Temple Bar; he was dead.

Do you know of any other Instances? - There was another at the corner of Green Street; One of our boys who is in the workhouse now, unless he is dead.

Extract from The Water Babies by Charles Kingsley, 1863

ONCE upon a time there was a little chimney-sweep, and his name was Tom. That is a short name, and you have heard it before, so you will not have much trouble in remembering it. He lived in a great town in the North country, where there were plenty of chimneys to sweep, and plenty of money for Tom to earn and his master to spend. He could not read nor write, and did not care to do either; and he never washed himself, for there was no water up the court where he lived. He had never been taught to say his prayers. He never had heard of God, or of Christ, except in words which you never have heard, and which it would have been well if he had never heard. He cried half his time, and laughed the other half. He cried when he had to climb the dark flues, rubbing his poor knees and elbows raw; and when the soot got into his eyes, which it did every day in the week; and when his master beat him, which he did every day in the week; and when he had not enough to eat, which happened every day in the week likewise. And he laughed the other half of the day, when he was tossing halfpennies with the other boys, or playing leap-frog over the posts, or bowling stones at the horses' legs as they trotted by, which last was excellent fun, when there was a wall at hand behind which to hide. As for chimney-sweeping, and being hungry, and being beaten, he took all that for the way of the world, like the rain and snow and thunder, and stood manfully with his back to it till it was over, as his old donkey did to a hail-storm; and then shook his ears and was as jolly as ever; and thought of the fine times coming, when he would be a man, and a master sweep, and sit in the public-house with a quart of beer and a long pipe, and play cards for silver money, and wear velveteens and ankle-jacks, and keep a white bull-dog with one grey ear, and carry her puppies in his pocket, just like a man. And he would have apprentices, one, two, three, if he could. How he would bully them, and knock them about, just as his master did to him; and make them carry home the soot sacks, while he rode before them on his donkey, with a pipe in his mouth and a flower in his button-hole, like a king at the head of his army. Yes, there were good times coming; and, when his master let him have a pull at the leavings of his beer, Tom was the jolliest boy in the whole town.

One day a smart little groom rode into the court where Tom lived. Tom was just hiding behind a wall, to heave half a brick at his horse's legs, as is the custom of that country when they welcome strangers; but the groom saw him, and halloed to him to know where Mr. Grimes, the chimney-sweep, lived. Now, Mr. Grimes was Tom's own master, and Tom was a good man of business, and always civil to customers, so he put the half-brick down quietly behind the wall, and proceeded to take orders.

Mr. Grimes was to come up next morning to Sir John Harthover's, at the Place, for his old chimney-sweep was gone to prison, and the chimneys wanted sweeping. And so he rode away, not giving Tom time to ask what the sweep had gone to prison for, which was a matter of interest to Tom, as he had been in prison once or twice himself. Moreover, the groom looked so very neat and clean, with his drab gaiters, drab breeches, drab jacket, snow-white tie with a smart pin in it, and clean round ruddy face, that Tom was offended and disgusted at his appearance, and considered him a stuck-up fellow, who gave himself airs because he wore smart clothes, and other people paid for them; and went behind the wall to fetch the half-brick after all; but did not, remembering that he had come in the way of business, and was, as it were, under a flag of truce.

His master was so delighted at his new customer that he knocked Tom down out of hand, and drank more beer that night than he usually did in two, in order to be sure of getting up in time next morning; for the more a man's head aches when he wakes, the more glad he is to turn out, and have a breath of fresh air. And, when he did get up at four the next morning, he knocked Tom down again, in order to teach him (as young gentlemen used to be taught at public schools) that he must be an extra good boy that day, as they were going to a very great house, and might make a very good thing of it, if they could but give satisfaction.

In Harthover Place

How many chimneys Tom swept I cannot say; but he swept so many that he got quite tired, and puzzled too, for they were not like the town flues to which he was accustomed, but such as you would find—if you would only get up them and look, which perhaps you would not like to do—in old country-houses, large

and crooked chimneys, which had been altered again and again, till they ran one into another, anastomosing (as Professor Owen would say) considerably. So Tom fairly lost his way in them; not that he cared much for that, though he was in pitchy darkness, for he was as much at home in a chimney as a mole is underground; but at last, coming down as he thought the right chimney, he came down the wrong one, and found himself standing on the hearthrug in a room the like of which he had never seen before.

Tom had never seen the like. He had never been in gentlefolks' rooms but when the carpets were all up, and the curtains down, and the furniture huddled together under a cloth, and the pictures covered with aprons and dusters; and he had often enough wondered what the rooms were like when they were all ready for the quality to sit in. And now he saw, and he thought the sight very pretty.

The room was all dressed in white,—white window-curtains, white bed-curtains, white furniture, and white walls, with just a few lines of pink here and there. The carpet was all over gay little flowers; and the walls were hung with pictures in gilt frames, which amused Tom very much. There were pictures of ladies and gentlemen, and pictures of horses and dogs. The horses he liked; but the dogs he did not care for much, for there were no bull-dogs among them, not even a terrier. But the two pictures which took his fancy most were, one a man in long garments, with little children and their mothers round him, who was laying his hand upon the children's heads. That was a very pretty picture, Tom thought, to hang in a lady's room. For he could see that it was a lady's room by the dresses which lay about.

The other picture was that of a man nailed to a cross, which surprised Tom much. He fancied that he had seen something like it in a shop-window. But why was it there? "Poor man," thought Tom, "and he looks so kind and quiet. But why should the lady have such a sad picture as that in her room? Perhaps it was some kinsman of hers, who had been murdered by the savages in foreign parts, and she kept it there for a remembrance." And Tom felt sad, and awed, and turned to look at something else.

The next thing he saw, and that too puzzled him, was a washing-stand, with ewers and basins, and soap and brushes, and towels, and a large bath full of clean water—what a heap of things all for washing! "She must be a very dirty lady," thought Tom, "by my master's rule, to want as much scrubbing as all that. But she must be very cunning to put the dirt out of the way so well afterwards, for I don't see a speck about the room, not even on the very towels."

And then, looking toward the bed, he saw that dirty lady, and held his breath with astonishment.

Under the snow-white coverlet, upon the snow-white pillow, lay the most beautiful little girl that Tom had ever seen. Her cheeks were almost as white as the pillow, and her hair was like threads of gold spread all about over the bed. She might have been as old as Tom, or maybe a year or two older; but Tom did not think of that. He thought only of her delicate skin and golden hair, and wondered whether she was a real live person, or one of the wax dolls he had seen in the shops. But when he saw her breathe, he made up his mind that she was alive, and stood staring at her, as if she had been an angel out of heaven.

No. She cannot be dirty. She never could have been dirty, thought Tom to himself. And then he thought, "And are all people like that when they are washed?" And he looked at his own wrist, and tried to rub the soot off, and wondered whether it ever would come off. "Certainly I should look much prettier then, if I grew at all like her."

And looking round, he suddenly saw, standing close to him, a little ugly, black, ragged figure, with bleared eyes and grinning white teeth. He turned on it angrily. What did such a little black ape want in that sweet young lady's room? And behold, it was himself, reflected in a great mirror, the like of which Tom had never seen before.

And Tom, for the first time in his life, found out that he was dirty; and burst into tears with shame and anger; and turned to sneak up the chimney again and hide; and upset the fender and threw the fire-irons down, with a noise as of ten thousand tin kettles tied to ten thousand mad dogs' tails.

Up jumped the little white lady in her bed, and, seeing Tom, screamed as shrill as any peacock.

Infant Mortality in Victorian Britain

Infant and child mortality was very high during the Victorian era (1837-1901). High mortality rates among the young were the result of industrialization, which led to rapid urbanization, increased pollution, severe impoverishment, and exploitation of child labour.

According to Report of the Medical Officer of Health for the City of London in 1849, twelve years after Queen Victoria's reign began, the death rate for children under 5 years of age was around 33% in some areas in London. In Kensington, a relatively wealthy district in London, over the course of one year, there were a combined number of 1,022 deaths among infants and children. In Islington, a district nearby, there were 2,269 deaths among infants and children. These are just two districts in London, which does not even come close to covering all of the United Kingdom.

During the Victorian era the United Kingdom became a world power. An industrial revolution had begun and craftsmanship took a backseat to mass production. There were 6,800 miles of railroad track by 1851, and trade was booming. This was a major change for most of the agricultural towns in England. These rapid changes brought new wealth to some a crushing poverty to others.

The following factors related to industrialization that led to the astronomically high rates of infant and child mortality in London.

I. The environment throughout the city itself was atrocious. The blackened rain that fell from the sky from the smog that hovered over the English capital and inadequate sewage systems that polluted water sources, created outbreaks of disease. When pregnant women became ill there was an increased probability that their infant would stillborn or develop a complication. Even if the baby was healthy at birth, their lungs were still developing and could be overwhelmed by the chemicals in the air which could bring diseases to the child as well.

II. To counteract the impact of pollution, the children needed strong immune systems to fight off foreign substances that could cause harm to their bodies. However the nutrition level for many young people at this time was inadequate. Many families were too poor to afford adequate nutrition. Breast feeding was often ineffective because of the mother's malnutrition. To offset the poor nourishment, some parents began to use new drugs that were now being produced from the Industrial Revolution, including opium. The medications that were administered to the children were not regulated by medical professionals. Some of them lowered appetite levels so hunger would dissipate for the children when there was no food.

III. With bad pollution and nutrition many children began to develop diseases. Tuberculosis and whooping cough were the main pulmonary illnesses that were extremely contagious and endemic in London. Smallpox was another significant killer of children. Cholera epidemics killed both young and old. The mortality rate of children was 33% higher than the rest of the population.

IV. This would continue until the end of the Victorian Era when vaccinations greatly reduced mortality in the city, cutting it in half for infants and toddlers. Smallpox was huge issue until a vaccine made by Edward Jenner, and widespread vaccination campaigns in the 19th century. The results of vaccinations weren't visible until the 1940 when the Free Vaccination Act allowed people of low income to receive the medication for free. While the newly made vaccinations were vital in the fight against infant mortality, they were somewhat negated by the conditions commonly found with child labour.

V. Various industries began employing young children. In this time, child labour was not a concern. People were unaware of the harm that could befall children and even adults in factories, coal mines and other industrial workplaces. The Industrial Revolution led to the construction of textile mills and factories that eroded children's bodies through long hours and bad conditions that they would see on a day to day basis. Jobs like coal mining and cleaning chimneys were extremely dangerous and led to respiratory issues from poor ventilation. Eventually acts were passed by parliament to limit child hours and raise the age requirement to begin working. Overall, while the industrial revolution brought many new inventions and medicine, it is the main cog in why the children of London were living and ultimately dying in harsh conditions.

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ANSWER CORRECTLY

all questions put to it, as tens of thousands of its *Bitterest Enemies* are obliged to admit. The newspapers interviewed it. Chemists examined it, celebrated Preachers attempted to explain it: but all in vain, it still remained

AN UNSOLVED MYSTERY

Read the following the result of a visit from a representative of the N.Y. Evening Post. He came, the most sceptical of men and returned - but read for yourself.

WHAT IS IT?

"The word means 'a little board:' and a little board, heart-shaped, and moving about is all that is at first apparent to the eye: but if you place your fingers gently on the surface it becomes instinct with intelligence, writes answers to your questions, talks with you, tells you the time of day, and does many other wonderful things. The incredulous will say these are delusions: but let them try the experiment. Yesterday we saw 'Planchette' give the house - not with precise accuracy, but difference of time might account for this discrepancy-write the names of persons whose existence was known to only one of the two of those present, and note the month in which a visit was to be paid.

'Planchette' is sometimes coy, suspicious, reluctant: will not work for the sceptical or non-magnetic and is, in fact, contrary. With others, whose mental conditions are perhaps in better accord with the Planchette's peculiarities, it literally jumps to do their bidding, and its pencil traverses the paper with extraordinary speed. The spiritualist will say that this is a new development of the phenomena of which they have so much to say; the curious that it is odd; the scoffers, that it is a pleasant parlour toy-in which final verdict the three classes will probably agree. Certainly, 'Planchette is a novelty.'" -New York Evening Post of May 6, 1868.

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The Little Match Girl by Hans Christian Anderson, 1846

It was so terribly cold. Snow was falling, and it was almost dark. Evening came on, the last evening of the year. In the cold and gloom a poor little girl, bareheaded and barefoot, was walking through the streets. Of course when she had left her house she'd had slippers on, but what good had they been? They were very big slippers, way too big for her, for they belonged to her mother. The little girl had lost them running across the road, where two carriages had rattled by terribly fast. One slipper she'd not been able to find again, and a boy had run off with the other, saying he could use it very well as a cradle some day when he had children of his own. And so the little girl walked on her naked feet, which were quite red and blue with the cold. In an old apron she carried several packages of matches, and she held a box of them in her hand. No one had bought any from her all day long, and no one had given her a cent.

Shivering with cold and hunger, she crept along, a picture of misery, poor little girl! The snowflakes fell on her long fair hair, which hung in pretty curls over her neck. In all the windows lights were shining, and there was a wonderful smell of roast goose, for it was New Year's eve. Yes, she thought of that!

In a corner formed by two houses, one of which projected farther out into the street than the other, she sat down and drew up her little feet under her. She was getting colder and colder, but did not dare to go home, for she had sold no matches, nor earned a single cent, and her father would surely beat her. Besides, it was cold at home, for they had nothing over them but a roof through which the wind whistled even though the biggest cracks had been stuffed with straw and rags.

Her hands were almost dead with cold. Oh, how much one little match might warm her! If she could only take one from the box and rub it against the wall and warm her hands. She drew one out. *R-r-ratch!* How it sputtered and burned! It made a warm, bright flame, like a little candle, as she held her hands over it; but it gave a strange light! It really seemed to the little girl as if she were sitting before a great iron stove with shining brass knobs and a brass cover. How wonderfully the fire burned! How comfortable it was! The youngster stretched out her feet to warm them too; then the little flame went out, the stove vanished, and she had only the remains of the burnt match in her hand.

She struck another match against the wall. It burned brightly, and when the light fell upon the wall it became transparent like a thin veil, and she could see through it into a room. On the table a snow-white cloth was spread, and on it stood a shining dinner service. The roast goose steamed gloriously, stuffed with apples and prunes. And what was still better, the goose jumped down from the dish and waddled along the floor with a knife and fork in its breast, right over to the little

girl. Then the match went out, and she could see only the thick, cold wall. She lighted another match. Then she was sitting under the most beautiful Christmas tree. It was much larger and much more beautiful than the one she had seen last Christmas through the glass door at the rich merchant's home. Thousands of candles burned on the green branches, and coloured pictures like those in the print shops looked down at her. The little girl reached both her hands toward them. Then the match went out. But the Christmas lights mounted higher. She saw them now as bright stars in the sky. One of them fell down, forming a long line of fire.

"Now someone is dying," thought the little girl, for her old grandmother, the only person who had loved her, and who was now dead, had told her that when a star fell down a soul went up to God.

She rubbed another match against the wall. It became bright again, and in the glow the old grandmother stood clear and shining, kind and lovely.

"Grandmother!" cried the child. "Oh, take me with you! I know you will disappear when the match is burned out. You will vanish like the warm stove, the wonderful roast goose and the beautiful big Christmas tree!"

And she quickly struck the whole bundle of matches, for she wished to keep her grandmother with her. And the matches burned with such a glow that it became brighter than daylight. Grandmother had never been so grand and beautiful. She took the little girl in her arms, and both of them flew in brightness and joy above the earth, very, very high, and up there was neither cold, nor hunger, nor fear—they were with God.

But in the corner, leaning against the wall, sat the little girl with red cheeks and smiling mouth, frozen to death on the last evening of the old year. The New Year's sun rose upon a little pathetic figure. The child sat there, stiff and cold, holding the matches, of which one bundle was almost burned.

"She wanted to warm herself," the people said. No one imagined what beautiful things she had seen, and how happily she had gone with her old grandmother into the bright New Year.

Extract from *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences* by Sir Frederick Treves, 1923

The shop was empty and grey with dust. Some old tins and a few shrivelled potatoes occupied a shelf and some vague vegetable refuse the window. The light of the place was dim, being obscured by the painted placard outside. The far end of the shop – where I expect the late proprietor sat at a desk – was cut off by a curtain or rather by a red tablecloth suspended from a cord by a few rings. The room was cold and dank, for it was the month of November. The year, I might say, was 1884.

The showman pulled back the curtain and revealed a bent figure crouching on a stool and covered by a brown blanket. In front of it, on a tripod, was a large brick heated by a Bunsen burner. Over this the creature was huddled to warm itself. It never moved when the curtain was drawn back. Locked up in an empty shop and lit by the faint blue light of the gas jet, this hunched-up figure was the embodiment of loneliness. It might have been a captive in a cavern or a wizard watching for unholy manifestations in the ghostly flame. Outside the sun was shining and one could hear the footsteps of the passers-by, a tune whistled by a boy and the companionable hum of traffic in the road.

The showman – speaking as if to a dog – called out harshly: “Stand up!” The thing arose slowly and let the blanket that covered its head and back fall to the ground. There stood revealed the most disgusting specimen of humanity that I have ever seen. In the course of my profession I had come upon lamentable deformities of the face due to injury or disease, as well as mutilations and contortions of the body depending upon like causes; but at no time had I met with such a degraded or perverted version of a human being as this lone figure displayed. He was naked to the waist, his feet were bare, he wore a pair of threadbare trousers that had once belonged to some fat gentleman’s dress suit.

From the intensified painting in the street I had imagined the Elephant Man to be of gigantic size. This, however, was a little man below the average height and made to look shorter by the bowing of his back. The most striking feature about him was his enormous and misshapened head. From the brow there projected a huge bony mass like a loaf, while from the back of the head hung a bag of spongy, fungous-looking skin, the surface of which was comparable to a brown cauliflower. On the top of the skull were a few long lank hairs. The osseous growth on the forehead almost occluded one eye. The circumference of the head was no less than that of the man’s waist. From the upper jaw

there projected another mass of bone. It protruded from the mouth like a pink stump, turning the upper lip inside out and making of the mouth a mere slobbering aperture. This growth from the jaw had been so exaggerated in the painting as to appear to be a rudimentary trunk or tusk. The nose was merely a lump of flesh, only recognizable as a nose from its position. The face was no more capable of expression than a block of gnarled wood. The back was horrible, because from it hung, as far down as the middle of the thigh, huge, sack-like masses of flesh covered by the same loathsome cauliflower skin.

The right arm was of enormous size and shapeless. It suggested the limb of the subject of elephantiasis. It was overgrown also with pendent masses of the same cauliflower-like skin. The hand was large and clumsy - a fin or paddle rather than a hand. There was no distinction between the palm and the back. The thumb had the appearance of a radish, while the fingers might have been thick, tuberous roots. As a limb it was almost useless. The other arm was remarkable by contrast. It was not only normal but was, moreover, a delicately shaped limb covered with fine skin and provided with a beautiful hand which any woman might have envied. From the chest hung a bag of the same repulsive flesh. It was like a dewlap suspended from the neck of a lizard. The lower limbs had the characters of the deformed arm. They were unwieldy, dropsical looking and grossly misshapened.

To add a further burden to his trouble the wretched man, when a boy, developed hip disease, which had left him permanently lame, so that he could only walk with a stick. He was thus denied all means of escape from his tormentors. As he told me later, he could never run away. One other feature must be mentioned to emphasize his isolation from his kind. Although he was already repellent enough, there arose from the fungous skin-growth with which he was almost covered a very sickening stench which was hard to tolerate. From the showman I learnt nothing about the Elephant Man, except that he was English, that his name was John Merrick and that he was twenty-one years of age.

Lost Hearts by M.R. James, 1895

It was, as far as I can ascertain, in September of the year 1811 that a post-chaise drew up before the door of Aswarby Hall, in the heart of Lincolnshire. The little boy who was the only passenger in the chaise, and who jumped out as soon as it had stopped, looked about him with the keenest curiosity during the short interval that elapsed between the ringing of the bell and the opening of the hall door. He saw a tall, square, red-brick house, built in the reign of Anne; a stone-pillared porch had been added in the purer classical style of 1790; the windows of the house were many, tall and narrow, with small panes and thick white woodwork. A pediment, pierced with a round window, crowned the front. There were wings to right and left, connected by curious glazed galleries, supported by colonnades, with the central block. These wings plainly contained the stables and offices of the house. Each was surmounted by an ornamental cupola with a gilded vane.

An evening light shone on the building, making the window-panes glow like so many fires. Away from the Hall in front stretched a flat park studded with oaks and fringed with firs, which stood out against the sky. The clock in the church-tower, buried in trees on the edge of the park, only its golden weather-cock catching the light, was striking six, and the sound came gently beating down the wind. It was altogether a pleasant impression, though tinged with the sort of melancholy appropriate to an evening in early autumn, that was conveyed to the mind of the boy who was standing in the porch waiting for the door to open to him.

The post-chaise had brought him from Warwickshire, where, some six months before, he had been left an orphan. Now, owing to the generous offer of his elderly cousin, Mr Abney, he had come to live at Aswarby. The offer was unexpected, because all who knew anything of Mr Abney looked upon him as a somewhat austere recluse, into whose steady-going household the advent of a small boy would import a new and, it seemed, incongruous element. The truth is that very little was known of Mr Abney's pursuits or temper. The Professor of Greek at Cambridge had been heard to say that no one knew more of the religious beliefs of the later pagans than did the owner of Aswarby. Certainly his library contained all the then available books bearing on the Mysteries, the Orphic poems, the worship of Mithras, and the Neo-Platonists. In the marble-paved hall stood a fine group of Mithras slaying a bull, which had been imported from the Levant at great expense by the owner. He had contributed a description of it to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and he had written a remarkable series of articles in the *Critical Museum* on the superstitions of the Romans of the Lower Empire. He was looked upon, in fine, as a man wrapped up in his books, and it was a matter of great surprise among his neighbours that he should ever have heard of his orphan cousin, Stephen Elliott, much more that he should have volunteered to make him an inmate of Aswarby Hall.

Whatever may have been expected by his neighbours, it is certain that Mr Abney — the tall, the thin, the austere — seemed inclined to give his young cousin a kindly reception. The moment the front-door was opened he darted out of his study, rubbing his hands with delight.

'How are you, my boy?— how are you? How old are you?' said he — 'that is, you are not too much tired, I hope, by your journey to eat your supper?'

‘No, thank you, sir,’ said Master Elliott; ‘I am pretty well.’

‘That’s a good lad,’ said Mr Abney. ‘And how old are you, my boy?’

It seemed a little odd that he should have asked the question twice in the first two minutes of their acquaintance.

‘I’m twelve years old next birthday, sir,’ said Stephen.

‘And when is your birthday, my dear boy? Eleventh of September, eh? That’s well — that’s very well. Nearly a year hence, isn’t it? I like — ha, ha! — I like to get these things down in my book. Sure it’s twelve? Certain?’

‘Yes, quite sure, sir.’

‘Well, well! Take him to Mrs Bunch’s room, Parkes, and let him have his tea — supper — whatever it is.’

‘Yes, sir,’ answered the staid Mr Parkes; and conducted Stephen to the lower regions.

Mrs Bunch was the most comfortable and human person whom Stephen had as yet met at Aswarby. She made him completely at home; they were great friends in a quarter of an hour: and great friends they remained. Mrs Bunch had been born in the neighbourhood some fifty-five years before the date of Stephen’s arrival, and her residence at the Hall was of twenty years’ standing. Consequently, if anyone knew the ins and outs of the house and the district, Mrs Bunch knew them; and she was by no means disinclined to communicate her information.

Certainly there were plenty of things about the Hall and the Hall gardens which Stephen, who was of an adventurous and inquiring turn, was anxious to have explained to him. ‘Who built the temple at the end of the laurel walk? Who was the old man whose picture hung on the staircase, sitting at a table, with a skull under his hand?’ These and many similar points were cleared up by the resources of Mrs Bunch’s powerful intellect. There were others, however, of which the explanations furnished were less satisfactory.

One November evening Stephen was sitting by the fire in the housekeeper’s room reflecting on his surroundings.

‘Is Mr Abney a good man, and will he go to heaven?’ he suddenly asked, with the peculiar confidence which children possess in the ability of their elders to settle these questions, the decision of which is believed to be reserved for other tribunals.

‘Good? — bless the child!’ said Mrs Bunch. ‘Master’s as kind a soul as ever I see! Didn’t I never tell you of the little boy as he took in out of the street, as you may say, this seven years back? and the little girl, two years after I first come here?’

‘No. Do tell me all about them, Mrs Bunch — now, this minute!’

‘Well,’ said Mrs Bunch, ‘the little girl I don’t seem to recollect so much about. I know master brought her back with him from his walk one day, and give orders to Mrs Ellis, as was housekeeper then, as she should be took every care with. And the pore child hadn’t no one belonging to her — she telled me so her own self — and here she lived with us a matter

of three weeks it might be; and then, whether she were somethink of a gipsy in her blood or what not, but one morning she out of her bed afore any of us had opened a eye, and neither track nor yet trace of her have I set eyes on since. Master was wonderful put about, and had all the ponds dragged; but it's my belief she was had away by them gipsies, for there was singing round the house for as much as an hour the night she went, and Parkes, he declare as he heard them a-calling in the woods all that afternoon. Dear, dear! a hodd child she was, so silent in her ways and all, but I was wonderful taken up with her, so domesticated she was — surprising.'

'And what about the little boy?' said Stephen.

'Ah, that pore boy!' sighed Mrs Bunch. 'He were a foreigner — Jevanny he called hisself — and he come a-tweaking his 'urdy-gurdy round and about the drive one winter day, and master 'ad him in that minute, and ast all about where he came from, and how old he was, and how he made his way, and where was his relatives, and all as kind as heart could wish. But it went the same way with him. They're a hunruly lot, them foreign nations, I do suppose, and he was off one fine morning just the same as the girl. Why he went and what he done was our question for as much as a year after; for he never took his 'urdy-gurdy, and there it lays on the shelf.'

The remainder of the evening was spent by Stephen in miscellaneous cross-examination of Mrs Bunch and in efforts to extract a tune from the hurdy-gurdy.

That night he had a curious dream. At the end of the passage at the top of the house, in which his bedroom was situated, there was an old disused bathroom. It was kept locked, but the upper half of the door was glazed, and, since the muslin curtains which used to hang there had long been gone, you could look in and see the lead-lined bath affixed to the wall on the right hand, with its head towards the window.

On the night of which I am speaking, Stephen Elliott found himself, as he thought, looking through the glazed door. The moon was shining through the window, and he was gazing at a figure which lay in the bath.

His description of what he saw reminds me of what I once beheld myself in the famous vaults of St Michan's Church in Dublin, which possesses the horrid property of preserving corpses from decay for centuries. A figure inexpressibly thin and pathetic, of a dusty leaden colour, enveloped in a shroud-like garment, the thin lips crooked into a faint and dreadful smile, the hands pressed tightly over the region of the heart.

As he looked upon it, a distant, almost inaudible moan seemed to issue from its lips, and the arms began to stir. The terror of the sight forced Stephen backwards and he awoke to the fact that he was indeed standing on the cold boarded floor of the passage in the full light of the moon. With a courage which I do not think can be common among boys of his age, he went to the door of the bathroom to ascertain if the figure of his dreams were really there. It was not, and he went back to bed.

Mrs Bunch was much impressed next morning by his story, and went so far as to replace the muslin curtain over the glazed door of the bathroom. Mr Abney, moreover, to whom

he confided his experiences at breakfast, was greatly interested and made notes of the matter in what he called 'his book'.

The spring equinox was approaching, as Mr Abney frequently reminded his cousin, adding that this had been always considered by the ancients to be a critical time for the young: that Stephen would do well to take care of himself, and to shut his bedroom window at night; and that Censorinus had some valuable remarks on the subject. Two incidents that occurred about this time made an impression upon Stephen's mind.

The first was after an unusually uneasy and oppressed night that he had passed — though he could not recall any particular dream that he had had.

The following evening Mrs Bunch was occupying herself in mending his nightgown.

'Gracious me, Master Stephen!' she broke forth rather irritably, 'how do you manage to tear your nightdress all to flinders this way? Look here, sir, what trouble you do give to poor servants that have to darn and mend after you!'

There was indeed a most destructive and apparently wanton series of slits or scorings in the garment, which would undoubtedly require a skilful needle to make good. They were confined to the left side of the chest — long, parallel slits about six inches in length, some of them not quite piercing the texture of the linen. Stephen could only express his entire ignorance of their origin: he was sure they were not there the night before.

'But,' he said, 'Mrs Bunch, they are just the same as the scratches on the outside of my bedroom door: and I'm sure I never had anything to do with making them.'

Mrs Bunch gazed at him open-mouthed, then snatched up a candle, departed hastily from the room, and was heard making her way upstairs. In a few minutes she came down.

'Well,' she said, 'Master Stephen, it's a funny thing to me how them marks and scratches can 'a' come there — too high up for any cat or dog to 'ave made 'em, much less a rat: for all the world like a Chinaman's finger-nails, as my uncle in the tea-trade used to tell us of when we was girls together. I wouldn't say nothing to master, not if I was you, Master Stephen, my dear; and just turn the key of the door when you go to your bed.'

'I always do, Mrs Bunch, as soon as I've said my prayers.'

'Ah, that's a good child: always say your prayers, and then no one can't hurt you.'

Herewith Mrs Bunch addressed herself to mending the injured nightgown, with intervals of meditation, until bed-time. This was on a Friday night in March, 1812.

On the following evening the usual duet of Stephen and Mrs Bunch was augmented by the sudden arrival of Mr Parkes, the butler, who as a rule kept himself rather to himself in his own pantry. He did not see that Stephen was there: he was, moreover, flustered and less slow of speech than was his wont.

'Master may get up his own wine, if he likes, of an evening,' was his first remark. 'Either I do it in the daytime or not at all, Mrs Bunch. I don't know what it may be: very like it's the

rats, or the wind got into the cellars; but I'm not so young as I was, and I can't go through with it as I have done.'

'Well, Mr Parkes, you know it is a surprising place for the rats, is the Hall.'

'I'm not denying that, Mrs Bunch; and, to be sure, many a time I've heard the tale from the men in the shipyards about the rat that could speak. I never laid no confidence in that before; but tonight, if I'd demeaned myself to lay my ear to the door of the further bin, I could pretty much have heard what they was saying.'

'Oh, there, Mr Parkes, I've no patience with your fancies! Rats talking in the wine-cellar indeed!'

'Well, Mrs Bunch, I've no wish to argue with you: all I say is, if you choose to go to the far bin, and lay your ear to the door, you may prove my words this minute.'

'What nonsense you do talk, Mr Parkes – not fit for children to listen to! Why, you'll be frightening Master Stephen there out of his wits.'

'What! Master Stephen?' said Parkes, awaking to the consciousness of the boy's presence. 'Master Stephen knows well enough when I'm a-playing a joke with you, Mrs Bunch.'

In fact, Master Stephen knew much too well to suppose that Mr Parkes had in the first instance intended a joke. He was interested, not altogether pleasantly, in the situation; but all his questions were unsuccessful in inducing the butler to give any more detailed account of his experiences in the wine-cellar.

* * * * *

We have now arrived at March 24, 1812. It was a day of curious experiences for Stephen: a windy, noisy day, which filled the house and the gardens with a restless impression. As Stephen stood by the fence of the grounds, and looked out into the park, he felt as if an endless procession of unseen people were sweeping past him on the wind, borne on resistlessly and aimlessly, vainly striving to stop themselves, to catch at something that might arrest their flight and bring them once again into contact with the living world of which they had formed a part. After luncheon that day Mr Abney said:

'Stephen, my boy, do you think you could manage to come to me tonight as late as eleven o'clock in my study? I shall be busy until that time, and I wish to show you something connected with your future life which it is most important that you should know. You are not to mention this matter to Mrs Bunch nor to anyone else in the house; and you had better go to your room at the usual time.'

Here was a new excitement added to life: Stephen eagerly grasped at the opportunity of sitting up till eleven o'clock. He looked in at the library door on his way upstairs that evening, and saw a brazier, which he had often noticed in the corner of the room, moved out before the fire; an old silver-gilt cup stood on the table, filled with red wine, and some written sheets of paper lay near it. Mr Abney was sprinkling some incense on the brazier from a round silver box as Stephen passed, but did not seem to notice his step.

The wind had fallen, and there was a still night and a full moon. At about ten o'clock Stephen was standing at the open window of his bedroom, looking out over the country. Still as the night was, the mysterious population of the distant moon-lit woods was not yet lulled to rest. From time to time strange cries as of lost and despairing wanderers sounded from across the mere. They might be the notes of owls or water-birds, yet they did not quite resemble either sound. Were not they coming nearer? Now they sounded from the nearer side of the water, and in a few moments they seemed to be floating about among the shrubberies. Then they ceased; but just as Stephen was thinking of shutting the window and resuming his reading of *Robinson Crusoe*, he caught sight of two figures standing on the gravelled terrace that ran along the garden side of the Hall — the figures of a boy and girl, as it seemed; they stood side by side, looking up at the windows. Something in the form of the girl recalled irresistibly his dream of the figure in the bath. The boy inspired him with more acute fear.

Whilst the girl stood still, half smiling, with her hands clasped over her heart, the boy, a thin shape, with black hair and ragged clothing, raised his arms in the air with an appearance of menace and of unappeasable hunger and longing. The moon shone upon his almost transparent hands, and Stephen saw that the nails were fearfully long and that the light shone through them. As he stood with his arms thus raised, he disclosed a terrifying spectacle. On the left side of his chest there opened a black and gaping rent; and there fell upon Stephen's brain, rather than upon his ear, the impression of one of those hungry and desolate cries that he had heard resounding over the woods of Aswarby all that evening. In another moment this dreadful pair had moved swiftly and noiselessly over the dry gravel, and he saw them no more.

Inexpressibly frightened as he was, he determined to take his candle and go down to Mr Abney's study, for the hour appointed for their meeting was near at hand. The study or library opened out of the front-hall on one side, and Stephen, urged on by his terrors, did not take long in getting there. To effect an entrance was not so easy. It was not locked, he felt sure, for the key was on the outside of the door as usual. His repeated knocks produced no answer. Mr Abney was engaged: he was speaking. What! why did he try to cry out? and why was the cry choked in his throat? Had he, too, seen the mysterious children? But now everything was quiet, and the door yielded to Stephen's terrified and frantic pushing.

* * * * *

On the table in Mr Abney's study certain papers were found which explained the situation to Stephen Elliott when he was of an age to understand them. The most important sentences were as follows:

'It was a belief very strongly and generally held by the ancients — of whose wisdom in these matters I have had such experience as induces me to place confidence in their assertions — that by enacting certain processes, which to us moderns have something of a barbaric complexion, a very remarkable enlightenment of the spiritual faculties in man may be attained: that, for example, by absorbing the personalities of a certain number of his fellow-

creatures, an individual may gain a complete ascendancy over those orders of spiritual beings which control the elemental forces of our universe.

‘It is recorded of Simon Magus that he was able to fly in the air, to become invisible, or to assume any form he pleased, by the agency of the soul of a boy whom, to use the libellous phrase employed by the author of the Clementine Recognitions, he had “murdered”. I find it set down, moreover, with considerable detail in the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, that similar happy results may be produced by the absorption of the hearts of not less than three human beings below the age of twenty-one years. To the testing of the truth of this receipt I have devoted the greater part of the last twenty years, selecting as the corpora vilia of my experiment such persons as could conveniently be removed without occasioning a sensible gap in society. The first step I effected by the removal of one Phoebe Stanley, a girl of gipsy extraction, on March 24, 1792. The second, by the removal of a wandering Italian lad, named Giovanni Paoli, on the night of March 23, 1805. The final “victim” – to employ a word repugnant in the highest degree to my feelings – must be my cousin, Stephen Elliott. His day must be this March 24, 1812.

‘The best means of effecting the required absorption is to remove the heart from the living subject, to reduce it to ashes, and to mingle them with about a pint of some red wine, preferably port. The remains of the first two subjects, at least, it will be well to conceal: a disused bathroom or wine-cellar will be found convenient for such a purpose. Some annoyance may be experienced from the psychic portion of the subjects, which popular language dignifies with the name of ghosts. But the man of philosophic temperament – to whom alone the experiment is appropriate – will be little prone to attach importance to the feeble efforts of these beings to wreak their vengeance on him. I contemplate with the liveliest satisfaction the enlarged and emancipated existence which the experiment, if successful, will confer on me; not only placing me beyond the reach of human justice (so-called), but eliminating to a great extent the prospect of death itself.’

* * * * *

Mr Abney was found in his chair, his head thrown back, his face stamped with an expression of rage, fright, and mortal pain. In his left side was a terrible lacerated wound, exposing the heart. There was no blood on his hands, and a long knife that lay on the table was perfectly clean. A savage wild-cat might have inflicted the injuries. The window of the study was open, and it was the opinion of the coroner that Mr Abney had met his death by the agency of some wild creature. But Stephen Elliott’s study of the papers I have quoted led him to a very different conclusion.

Article from the Pall Mall Gazette, Friday 31st August 1888

HORRIBLE MURDER IN EAST LONDON WHITECHAPEL MYSTERY

Scarcely has the horror and sensation caused by the discovery of the murdered woman in Whitechapel some short time ago had time to abate, when another discovery is made, which, for the brutality exercised on the victim, is even more shocking, and will no doubt create as great a sensation in the vicinity as its predecessor.

The affair up to the present is enveloped in complete mystery, and the police have as yet no evidence to trace the perpetrators of the horrible deed.

The facts are that as Constable John Neil was walking down Bucks-row, Thomas-street, Whitechapel, about a quarter to four o'clock this morning, he discovered a woman between thirty-five and forty years of age lying at the side of the street with her throat cut right open from ear to ear, the instrument with which the deed was done tracing the throat from left to right. The wound was an inch wide, and blood was flowing profusely.

A further examination showed the horrible nature of the crime, for the lower part of the woman's body was found to have been horribly mutilated by three or four deep gashes. Any one of the wounds was sufficient to cause death. As the corpse lies in the mortuary it presents a ghastly sight.

The victim seems to be between thirty-five and forty years of age, and measures five feet two inches in height. The hair is dark - features small. The hands are bruised, and bear evidence of having been engaged in a severe struggle. There is the impression of a ring having been worn on one of the deceased's fingers, but there is nothing to show that it had been wrenched from her in a struggle. Some of the front teeth have also been knocked out, and the face is bruised on both cheeks and very much discoloured.

Deceased wore a rough brown ulster with large buttons in front, a brown dress and a petticoat which bears the name of the Lambeth Workhouse. The clothes are torn and cut up in several places, bearing evidence of the ferocity with which the murder was committed.

A night watchman was in the street where the crime was committed, but he heard no screams and saw no signs of the scuffle. The body was quite warm when taken to the mortuary at half-past four this morning.

Constance Kent's letter to Sir John Eardley Wilmot, 1860

The murder I committed to avenge my mother whose place had been usurped by my stepmother. The latter had been living in the family ever since my birth. She treated me with all the kindness and affection of a mother (for my own mother never loved or cared for me) and I loved her as though she had been.

When no more than three years old I began to observe that my mother held quite a secondary place both as a wife and as mistress of the house. She it was who really ruled. Many conversations on the subject, which I was considered too young

to understand, I heard and remembered in after years. At that time I always took part against my mother, whom being spoken of with contempt I too despised. As I grew older and understood that my father loved her and treated my mother with indifference my opinion began to alter. I felt a secret dislike to her when she spoke scornfully or disparagingly of my mother.

Mamma died. From that time my love turned to the most bitter hatred. Even after her death she continued to speak of her with scorn. At such times my hate grew so intense that I could not remain in the room. I vowed a deadly vengeance, renounced all belief in religion and devoted myself body and soul to the Evil Spirit, invoking his aid in my scheme of revenge. At first I thought of murdering her but that seemed to me too short a pang. I would have her feel my revenge. She had robbed my mother of the affection which was her due, so I would rob her of what she most loved. From that time I became a demon always seeking to do evil and to lead others into it, ever trying

to find an occasion to accomplish my evil design. I found it.

Nearly five years have since passed away during which time I have either been in a wild feverish state of mind only happy in doing evil, or else so very wretched that I often could have put an end to myself had means been near at the moment. I felt hatred towards everyone, and a wish to make them as wretched as myself.

At last a change came. My conscience tormented me with remorse. Miserable, wretched, suspicious, I felt as though Hell were in me. Then I resolved to confess.

I am now ready to make what restitution is in my power. A life for a life is all that I can give, as the Evil done can never be repaired.

I had no mercy, let none ask it for me, though indeed all must regard me with too much horror.

Forgiveness from those I have so deeply injured I dared not ask. I hated, so is their hatred my just retribution.

Victorian Era Lunatic Asylums

The Rise of the Lunatic Asylum

The growth in the number of asylums was largely driven by The Lunacy Act. As the name of the legislation suggests, there was little concern for patient's sensibilities, and typically patients were described as lunatics, imbeciles, insane, idiots or cretins.

This act meant that Counties were legally obliged to provide asylum for people with mental deficiencies. Between the passing of the act in 1845 and 1890, when the next act was passed, over sixty asylums were built and opened.

Admission to the Asylums - What did happen

Despite the good intentions of the 1853 Act, it appears there was still plenty of scope to abuse the system. Unfortunately, for many, asylums were regarded as prisons disguised as hospitals. It was a convenient way to remove the poor and incurable from society and for those with money, private madhouses were often convenient dumping grounds for unwanted wives.

Although many patients were admitted for short periods of time, there are plenty of stories of patients who were admitted to asylums, often for very unsatisfactory reasons, and basically forgotten about. Some could spend twenty or more years locked away, and sadly some patients died without ever being released.

The chances of admission were higher if you were a woman

Reasons for admission were very much down to personal judgment and seem to have been heavily weighted against women. Indeed there were often many more women compared with men confined in these institutions.

Depression associated with various situations seems to be common. Examples listed include valid reasons such as 'death of sons in war', 'desertion or death of husbands' and 'domestic trouble'. Many other reasons, however, are much more spurious. For example, 'imaginary female trouble', 'immoral life' (often associated with carrying &/or delivering an illegitimate child), 'menstrual problems', 'the menopause', 'uterine problems', 'female disease' and 'nymphomania'.

'Hysteria' is also cited as a reason for admission. This is, however, a subjective assessment and one that was easily abused. Women at the time were expected to be demure, polite and agreeable to the men in their lives. Should a woman dare to speak out of turn or argue with her father or husband, however, she could be considered hysterical and in need of treatment.

Equally worrying was that women were admitted if they had 'over action of the mind'. This could be because they wanted to educate themselves, or for some, it may have

been as simple as wanting to read. Indeed, 'book reading' is listed as a reason for admission to the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum.

Life inside the Asylum

There were strict segregation rules within the asylum. On admission, patients were known to be either private or pauper patients and were housed in wards appropriate to their status. Whereas private patients had fewer beds to the ward and some degree of privacy, pauper wards contained as many beds as the hospital could accommodate, meaning there was barely space between the beds and no privacy.

In addition, there was strict segregation of males and females, with wards being housed in different wings, or even separate buildings, within the hospital.

Life inside the asylum was one of routine and orderliness. Patients were woken at 7am and given a breakfast of tea, coffee or cocoa with porridge and bread. A midday meal, was served at around 12.30pm. A tea of bread and cake would be served around early evening, just before the patients were sent to bed for the night.

Outside of meal times, routines differed for men and women. One of the most common jobs for the men was to work on the farm. Many asylums tried to be self-sufficient and much of the food consumed by the patients and staff was produced on the farm. Many men also worked in the bakery, to produce their own goods, or in the kitchen.

Women, however, were usually kept indoors. The laundry employed the majority of them, while many more were kept busy mending in the needle room. A proportion of both sexes would be expected to do cleaning duties around the wards.

For those patients who wouldn't or couldn't work, the airing courts would be opened for an hour in the morning and afternoon so that they could take the air.

In the early days of the asylums, security was tight and patients were only let out of doors under heavy security. As time went on, however, the rules were relaxed and patients were encouraged to go outside and even interact with other people.

This was especially true for men, who were they allowed to tend the garden or join sports teams. These activities were not permitted for women, however, and other than a gentle walk around the gardens they could expect to spend their time indoors.

Treatments:

- **Restraints and the padded cell**

Physically restraining patients with straight jackets or fastening them to beds was one of the easiest ways of controlling those with excitable or aggressive behaviour. It was also used for patients thought to be at risk of suicide. As an alternative, patients were placed

in isolated padded cells for short periods of time. These rooms contained nothing, and the walls and floors were covered with leather or canvas pouches filled with horse hair, to prevent patients from harming themselves.

- **Water Therapy**

Water was a popular way to treat a variety of conditions. Cold water, either in the form of a bath or shower, was used to calm down aggressive or excitable patients, while warm water, usually in a bath, was used for patients with melancholy. Warm water therapy could be soothing. Patients would be put into a bath, sometimes on a canvas hammock held in place by a metal frame, and covered with warm or body temperature water up to their chin. The bath was then covered with a canvas sheet, with a hole for the patient's head, and they would be left there for hours, or sometimes days. The colder water was allowed to drain from the bottom of the bath, while warmer water was constantly added.

Cold water therapy, on the other hand, could be extreme. In short, sharp bursts, of about fifteen to twenty minutes, it was used to reduce those in a highly excitable or manic state to calm, obedient patients. Treatments varied by institution and doctor, but techniques included:

1. Tying the naked patient to a chair and pouring buckets of cold water over their heads.
2. Restraining patients in cold shower rooms, or shower-baths, and spraying water into their faces as well as onto their bodies.
3. Using chairs to immerse patients into small ponds until they were at the point of unconsciousness before they were removed from the water and allowed to recover. This process could be repeated until the desired outcome was achieved.

In patients who failed to respond to the initial therapy, or if the physician thought they might 're-offend', treatment was repeated. Sometimes it could go on for hours, while for others it was repeated daily until the patient was felt to be in a satisfactory state of mind.

Some physicians were so fond of water therapy, they saw it as a means of corrective therapy, to 'encourage' the patient to adopt the behaviour expected of them.

- **Drug Treatment: Paraldehyde**

While there were very few drug treatments in the Victorian Era, paraldehyde (a sedative that calms the nervous system) was introduced into UK clinical practice in 1882. It was found to be useful to treat convulsions (fits), as well as induce sleep. Indeed, it was so effective at inducing sleep; patients would often be given paraldehyde after their early evening tea to quieten them down for the night and to make it easier for the nurses to get everyone to bed.

Extract from Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte, 1847

In this story, Jane Eyre, a governess (live in nanny and teacher) is about to marry her employer, Mr Rochester. However the ceremony is disrupted when someone reveals Mr Rochester has a secret 'mad' wife hidden in the attic. Mr Rochester admits it is true and takes Jane to meet her...

He passed on and ascended the stairs, still holding my hand, and still beckoning the gentlemen to follow him, which they did. We mounted the first staircase, passed up the gallery, proceeded to the third storey: the low, black door, opened by Mr Rochester's master-key, admitted us to the tapestried room, with its great bed and its pictorial cabinet.

'You know this place, Mason,' said our guide, 'she bit and stabbed you here.'

He lifted the hangings from the wall, uncovering the second door: this too, he opened. In a room without a window, there burnt a fire guarded by a high and strong fender, and a lamp suspended from the ceiling by a chain. Grace Poole bent over the fire, apparently cooking something in a saucepan. In the deep shade, at the far end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face.

'Good-morrow, Mrs Poole!' said Mr Rochester. 'How are you?' and how is your charge today?'

'We're tolerable, sir, I thank you,' replied Grace, lifting the boiling mess carefully on to the hob: 'rather snappish, but not 'rageous.'

A fierce cry seemed to give the lie to her favourable report: the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind-feet.

'Ah! sir, she sees you!' exclaimed Grace: 'you'd better not stay.'

'Only a few moments, Grace: you must allow me a few moments.'

Take care then, sir! - for God's sake, take care!

The maniac bellowed: she parted her shaggy locks from her visage, and gazed wildly at her visitors. I recognised well that purple face, - those bloated features. Mrs Poole advanced.

'Keep out of the way,' said Mr Rochester, thrusting her aside: 'she has no knife now, I suppose, and I'm on my guard.'

'One never knows what she has, sir: she is so cunning; it is not in mortal discretion to fathom her craft.'

'We had better leave her,' whispered Mason.

'Go to the devil!' was his brother-in-law's recommendation.

'Ware!' cried Grace. The three gentlemen retreated simultaneously. Mr Rochester flung me behind him; the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek: they struggled. She was a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest - more than once she almost throttled him, athletic as he was. He could have settled her with a well-planted blow: but he would not strike: he would only wrestle. At last he mastered her arms; Grace Poole gave him a cord and he pinioned them behind her: with more rope, which was at hand, he bound her to a chair. The operation was performed amidst the fiercest yells and the most convulsive plunges. Mr Rochester then turned to the spectators, he looked at them with a smile both acrid and desolate.

'That is my wife,' said he. 'Such is the sole conjugal embrace I am ever to know - such are the endearments which are to solace my leisure hours! And this is what I wished to have' (laying his hand on my shoulder): 'this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon. I wanted her just as a change after that fierce ragout. Wood and Briggs, look at the difference! Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder - this face with that mask - this form with that bulk; then judge me, priest of the gospel and man of the law, and remember with what judgment ye judge shall be judged! Off with you now. I must shut up my prize.'

Extract from Wide Sargasso Sea by Jean Rhys, 1966

Wide Sargasso Sea is a prequel to Jane Eyre. It focuses mainly on Antoinette Bertha Mason's perspective. It accounts for Antoinette's childhood, encounter and marriage to Rochester and his gradual awareness of Antoinette's lunacy. Part III is set in England while Antoinette is kept in the attic of Thornfield Hall under the supervision of the enigmatic Grace Poole. Narrated by Bertha who remains voiceless in Jane Eyre, the novel mainly seeks to give a voice to the 'madwoman in the attic'.

In this room I wake early and lie shivering for it is very cold. At last Grace Poole, the woman who looks after me, lights a fire with paper and sticks a lump of coal. She kneels to blow it with bellows. The paper shrivels, the sticks crackle and spit, the coal smoulders and glowers. In the end flames shoot up and they are beautiful. I get out of bed and go close to watch them and to wonder why I have been brought here. For what reason? There must be a reason. What is it that I must do? When I first came I thought it would be for a day, two days, a week perhaps. I thought that when I saw him and spoke to him I would be wise as serpents, harmless as doves. 'I give you all I have freely,' I would say, 'and I will not trouble you again if you will let me go.' But he never came. [...]

There is a window high up - you cannot see out of it. My bed had doors but they have been taken away. There is no much else in the room. Her bed, a black press, the table in the middle and two black chairs carved with fruit and flowers. They have high backs and no arms. The dressing-room is small, the room next to this one is hung with tapestry. Looking at the tapestry one day I recognized my mother dressed in an evening gown but with bare feet. She looked away from me just as she used to do. I wouldn't tell Grace this. Her name oughtn't to be Grace. Names matter, like when he wouldn't call me Antoinette, and I saw Antoinette drifting out of the window with her scents, her pretty clothes and her looking-glass.

There is no looking-glass here and I don't know what I am like now. I remember watching myself brush my hair and how my eyes looked back at me. The girl I saw was myself and not quite myself. Long ago when I was a child and very lonely I tried to kiss her. But the glass was between us - hard, cold and misted over with my breath. Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I?

The door of the tapestry room is kept locked. It leads, I know, into a passage. That is where Grace stands and talks to another woman whom I have never seen. Her name is Leah. I listen but I cannot understand what they say.

So there is still the sound of whispering that I have heard all my life, but these are different voices.

When night comes, and she has had several drinks and sleeps, it is easy to take the keys. I know now where she keeps them. Then I open the door and walk into their world. It is, as I always knew, made of cardboard. I have seen it before somewhere, this cardboard world where everything is coloured brown or dark red or yellow that has no light in it. As I walk along the passages I wish I could see what is behind the cardboard. They tell me I am in England but I don't believe them. We lost our way to England. When? Where? I don't remember, but we lost it. Was it that evening in the cabin when he found me talking with the young man who brought me food? I put my arms round his neck and asked him to help me. He said, 'I didn't know what to do, sir.' I smashed the glasses and plates against the porthole. I hoped it would break and the sea come in. A woman came and then an older man who cleared up the broken things on the floor. He did not look at me while he was doing it. The third man said drink this and you will sleep. I drank it and I said, 'It isn't like it seems to be.' - 'I know. It never is,' he said. And then I slept. When I woke it was a different sea. Colder. It was that night, I think, that we changed course and lost our way to England. This cardboard house where I walk at night is not England.

