

# **A Picture of the Age: 1849-1999**

*Written by Graham Citrine to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Christ Church*

## **Chapter Two: 1874-1899**

The second twenty-five year period in the life of Christ Church witnessed so many important changes that it becomes difficult to decide what to include and what may be safely left out.

Perhaps the most significant changes relevant to our lives took place in the condition of the people, particularly the women. In the earlier years of the century, indeed throughout history, women from middle-class, fairly prosperous, homes, stayed at home to learn the skills of being a housewife and mother. Poorer women had always worked because they had to - there was no room for a non-wage earner in a working-class family: women as well as children were expected to provide a small amount to the family budget. Indeed, there was a great deal of resentment in many working class households at the introduction of compulsory education, for it stopped young children contributing to the family income. One of the reasons for the extended summer holiday throughout August, which still remains, was not to give children a time of rest in the sun - May and June were better times for that - but to free them for work on the farms to bring in the harvest; without that provision the Act might not have been passed.

The period beginning in 1874 saw a time of unemployment; I have mentioned earlier the need for my Grandfather to leave school to earn his living at the age of 11. It was the aim of all boys at the age of 14 to become apprenticed to a trade which would give some guarantee of employment as a skilled worker. At that age, therefore, my grandfather was fortunate in gaining an apprenticeship on the railway as a plumber, but in order to take up the post, he had to report at Preston in Lancashire at 8 a.m. Accordingly, his mother woke him at 3 a.m. and by 4 o'clock he was on his way - the ferry across the Mersey was 1d, he then walked to Exchange Station in Liverpool, not to catch the train - such luxuries were beyond the family finances - but to walk to Preston, some 25 to 30 miles away, by following the railway line. He arrived in time to be taken on and of course, once he was a railway employee, he was allowed free travel on the railways for the rest of his life, rising to become a master-plumber with the old L.M.S. Railway and taking great pride in his work - I can remember as a child being taken by him to the Gents' Lavatories on Chester Station and having all the elaborate plumbing work explained - I visited it years later with my own children and as far as I could see it was still working unchanged from when my grandfather had first installed it more than eighty years before. One wonders how many young people of today would be prepared to walk 25 miles to ensure their employment.

However, one of the results of the Education Act was to create a pressing need for educated women with their greater understanding of and patience with young children to become teachers - teachers who would be prepared to work for a lower rate of pay than men. (It was not until the middle of our own century that women teachers were given equal pay with men.) It became a 'respectable' job for daughters of the lower middle-class.

Respectable work, also in offices when the typewriter was invented. Before that all letters and their copies were painstakingly written out by hand in 'copperplate' handwriting by male copy clerks - every office had two or three such young men. With the coming of the typewriter, one reasonably educated young woman, using carbon papers, could type two or three times more letters, plus copies, than had previously been written by the copy

clerks. Add to this the coming of the telephone - by the early 1880s a telephone exchange was set up in London and by the 1890s the instrument had spread throughout the country -and the need was for young ladies with the greater dexterity of their sex to carry out this new work. For the first time, women were going out to work not necessarily for economic reasons but because they wanted to, and soon preferred the greater freedom and independence this gave to them. In time, this independence was to lead to their demand for the vote - but not yet!

One of the inevitable results of these changes in employment was a change to a more sensible form of dress. It would be impossible for a crinoline-clad lady to sweep around a schoolroom or office. The crinoline disappeared, remaining for a short time as the bustle, a small cage at the back of the dress, but this too disappeared very quickly in the 1880's. Dresses now, though long, conformed to the general shape of the figure and therefore became the basis for modern fashion. Dresses were lighter and more comfortable, and this trend was increased further with the growth in sport for young ladies.

Croquet and Archery had long been acceptable out-door pursuits of both men and women, but the more energetic sports were confined to the men. In the 1870s Lawn Tennis was introduced - known at first as 'Sphairistike'. In 1877 the Wimbledon championships began for both men and women, and though by no means as energetic as the present day game it did require ladies to move fairly quickly about the court and this in turn demanded a greater freedom of movement in dresses light enough and designed for the purpose. And of course, once women experienced the new freedom there was no going back to the old ways.

Perhaps the greatest boost for the freedom of women was the invention of the 'Safety Bicycle'. The upper-classes were accustomed to ride horses, but the bicycle - a development of the 'velocipede' or hobby-horse of the early century - was to give mobility to the middle-classes. The early bicycles were known as the 'ordinary' or 'Penny-farthing', dangerous machines ridden only by daring young men - and quite unacceptable for women. But by 1888, the safety bicycle using a chain to drive the wheels, and with Dunlop's new pneumatic tyres, meant comfortable, easy-to-ride machines for both sexes. The freedom to explore the countryside cheaply and easily again gave a freedom to all, but particularly to young women, never known before in history. Again, this led to lighter, more suitable clothing - there was a move for women to copy the knickerbockers favoured by men, but these were seen as unseemly. Instead, ladies' cycles had the cross bar lowered so that they could ride in their long skirts.

The 1880s saw another significant step forward in transport, for in Germany Benz produced a carriage driven by a petrol engine - he named the vehicle 'Mercedes' after his daughter. In 1888, Gottfried Daimler, another German, patented the internal combustion engine, and the Motor Age had begun. Britain was not in the forefront here because of a law which demanded that any horseless carriage could travel no faster than four miles per hour and must be preceded by a man carrying a red flag.

This dated back to the early century when steam carriages had overturned at speed or had frightened horses. It was not until 1896 that the law was repealed and it was celebrated by car enthusiasts with a rally from London to Brighton in November of that year. In 1897 the Royal Automobile Club was founded to encourage the use of cars, but most cars in Britain came from Europe, particularly from France. It would not be until the next century that British cars began to appear. What the introduction of the car showed was that Britain was no longer in the forefront of new design and technology: she was facing challenges - more of this later.

In the 1870's, the Bank Holiday Act had decreed that Easter Monday, Whit Monday, the first Monday in August, and Boxing Day were to be universal holidays in addition to

Christmas Day and Good Friday. Also, many employers were allowing their workers an annual holiday, often with pay. The working-class man had leisure time unknown in the past. In addition to Bank Holidays, there came the practice of the five and a half day week - Saturday afternoon became a time for relaxation. This was partly to avoid the practice of Monday absenteeism - 'St. Monday' as it became known. Saturday afternoon became the time for watching sport, particularly football. Association Football had its roots in the Public Schools, its laws being drawn up by Cambridge students in 1863. In 1871 the F.A. Cup was established, its first winners being amateur teams, and this continued for the next 12 years until 1883 when Blackburn Rovers won. By the 1880s most large towns and cities had a football team. Where there was a strong Irish element there could be two teams - one supported by the Catholics and one by the Protestants, as happened in Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester and Edinburgh. Professionalism came in because working-class men could not give up time and money to train and to play. Rugby, named after the School where it was first played, also divided into professional and amateur codes - Rugby Union remaining strictly amateur until this century, Rugby League being the professional version of the game.

Class prejudice was seen in the descriptions of these games, professionalism being seen as something with which no gentleman would involve himself. Association Football, 'Soccer', was described as a gentleman's game played by hooligans; Rugby Union as a hooligan's game played by gentlemen; Rugby League as a hooligan's game played by hooligans.

The same prejudices existed in cricket where again there was a strict divide between amateur and professional. Cricket was more of a rich man's game because of the time needed to play and to watch - sometimes over several days. It may be that one of the causes of England's decline as a cricketing nation is the present reliance on one-day, limited overs matches which are exciting and draw in the spectators but which do not produce batsmen who can stay at the wicket for several hours, taking the shine of the bowling. In the 1870s and 80s, W.G. Grace was the colossus of English cricket. A Gloucestershire doctor, he was as well-known by his initials as W.E. Gladstone himself; many of his records remain to the present day. The Captain of England and every County Captain was an amateur. In reports in the papers, amateurs were always distinguished by the prefix 'Mr'. Professionals were simply called by their surnames, followed by initials. Many county grounds had two dressing rooms -one for 'gentlemen' and one for 'players', and separate gates for them to enter or leave the pavilion. It was taken for granted that England would win any match against any opposition, so when a visiting Australian team defeated England by 7 runs in 1882 there appeared an obituary in the 'Sporting Times' declaring that English cricket had died, had been cremated, and its ashes taken to Australia - thus starting the famous Test series which still continues. Working-class cricketers played their games in parks and on village greens on Saturday afternoons. [I can remember in the 1930s a gentleman who insisted on walking across the pitch whenever Birkenhead Park were playing to assert his right to walk in the public park wherever and whenever he wished - the players used to applaud him, then carry on with the game.]

In 1896, Baron de Coubertin began the Modern Olympic Games in Athens, basing his ideal on the English Public School amateurism. Very few countries entered. Indeed an English visitor to Athens attended the Games and was asked to represent Britain in the Long Jump. He agreed, found some suitable clothing which he borrowed from another athlete, went into the arena and won the Olympic title! That is when the Games were truly amateur. These early games included sports such as tug-of-war - again, usually won by the British; it is interesting to remember that until the Montreal games in 1976, Britain led the world in the number of Olympic Medals held. Since then, of course, she has been

overtaken by the USA and by Soviet Russia, and at each new series of games, continues to fall further behind.

Another innovation of greater leisure time was the annual seaside holiday. As more people were granted holiday time, so resorts began to grow, dedicated to the holiday-maker. Employers were beginning to realise that workers worked more efficiently, were more contented and loyal, if they were treated properly. In 1871 there had been only 48 seaside towns designated as holiday places: by 1891 there were more than 200. Most followed a pattern - promenade, large hotels or boarding houses, pier (so people could 'go to sea' without the discomfort of seasickness), often a fairground or other amusements, small shops selling anything the holiday maker might want – buckets and spades for the children, shrimping nets, beach balls, and that unique English treat – seaside rock with the name of the resort printed through the middle - nowhere else does that particular sweet occur, it takes its place with Humbugs and Liquorice Allsorts as typically English sweets.

Sea bathing became popular, but for obvious reasons men and women no longer bathed in the nude (on separate beaches or at different times of course). Instead, voluminous costumes were worn and changing took place in the bathing hut, which would then be pulled into the water so that there was no threat to modesty. It also saw the innovation of the seaside postcard - a cheap and easy way to let others know of your good fortune, the card always showing the resort at its best with no clouds or rain visible. It also saw the beginning of the comic postcard, possibly unique to Britain. Most view cards came from Germany and by the turn of the century several hundred million cards were being sent annually, often with the same message - 'Wish you were here!' In Lancashire, where the Wakes weeks allowed a week's holiday to the cotton workers, the resort of Blackpool began to grow, and also the more refined Southport. Indeed, many resorts had their popular areas and their more respectable part, so that Brighton had Hove, Blackpool had St. Anne's, and New Brighton had Harrison Drive, etc.

There was certainly a need to escape the towns: a description of London in the late 1870s by a visiting Frenchman will, I am sure, bring back memories of the English Sunday - 'Sunday in London in the rain: all the shops are shut, the streets deserted, the aspect is of an immense well-ordered cemetery ... There is water everywhere, water impregnated with an odour of soot. A yellowish fog fills the air ... after an hour's walk in London on a Sunday, one contemplates suicide.' To improve on this, public parks were established, and on Sundays there would always be a brass band playing popular tunes while the people walked slowly along, dressed in their Sunday best - again, a picture which must bring back memories to many, for the custom continued until 1939.

The Music Hall was becoming more respectable rather than a mere drinking place. Its performers were also now accepted into society - performers such as Albert Chevalier ('My Old Dutch'), Vesta Tilley, Tom Costello ('After the Ball') and others were invited to perform before Royalty itself (but not Marie Lloyd, the most popular singer, who was considered far too vulgar).

Drinking of alcohol was still an escape for many: most streets in working-class areas had their corner public house. Prices were cheap - mild beer was 4d a quart, best Burton Bitter 3d a pint. Figures show that in the 1870's spirits consumption was 1.3 gallons per head, and beer 34.4 gallons. When one considers the number of non-drinkers in the many Temperance Societies, then the drinkers must have taken in huge amounts of this liquor. Not surprisingly, William Booth's Salvation Army took its fight directly into the public houses, where it waged its greatest battles, winning for itself at the same time huge admiration for its courage. No publican ever stopped its members from selling its "War Cry" in the pubs on a Saturday night.

What were people reading at this time? George Eliot was at her height, her greatest novel,

'Middlemarch', selling hundreds of thousands in its cheap edition; Dickens, despite the fact that he had died in 1870, continued to sell by the million. His only rival was Mrs Henry Wood, whose 'East Lynne' ("Gone, gone, and never called me mother!") also sold more than a million and was turned into a popular play. Ouida, whose 'Under Two Flags' gave exaggerated descriptions of other countries, was also popular, though not quite respectable. The new Education Act meant that more people could read, and this led to cheap editions of good books [Shakespeare's plays could be bought for 1/-each] and the generosity of Andrew Carnegie meant that cheap lending libraries were established in many towns, including Birkenhead. Books were still serialised in magazines, the most famous at this time being George Newne's 'Strand Magazine' with its Sherlock Holmes' stories by Conan Doyle - who incidentally hated his invented character, wanting to be known for his serious historical novels.

One poet who fails to get the recognition he deserves is the great William McGonagall who produced a series of poems at this time in the most execrable verse ever encountered in the English language. He wrote a poem to celebrate the opening of the Tay railway bridge praising its construction, and when that bridge collapsed in a terrible storm in 1879, he wrote another on the tragedy ending with the memorable lines:

'I must now conclude my lay  
By telling the world fearlessly without the least dismay,  
That your central girders would not have given way,  
At least many sensible men do say,  
Had they been supported on each side with buttresses,  
At least many sensible men confesses,  
For the stronger we our houses do build,  
The less chance we have of being killed.

The Times' was still the most widely read serious newspaper, but was now being challenged by 'The Daily Telegraph'. It was the 'Telegraph' which in the 1870s, in conjunction with the New York 'Herald', sent Stanley to Africa to seek Livingstone, bringing stories of interior Africa which were to have profound results on that country. The poor tended to buy 'Police News' and 'Police Gazette', both sensational papers dealing with the more lurid and titillating crimes of passion and murder. The murders by 'Jack the Ripper' in the 1880s gave these papers a huge boost in circulation. Two men stand out in the production of cheap popular papers - George Newnes and Alfred Harmsworth. Both provided what the less educated wanted to read. In 1881 Newnes produced 'Titbits', followed in 1888 by Harmsworth's 'Answers'. They were full of small items of news and trivia, scraps of simple amusement and basic information (e.g. if all the sausages eaten in Britain were laid end-to-end they would reach Australia). Appealing to the less literate, they had short paragraphs, illustrations and though shallow, they gave no offence and were often very moralising in their answers. Selling at 1d a week, both had sales of more than half a million.

Harmsworth also appealed to children with his 'Comic Cuts' and 'Chips', weekly half-penny comics which remained popular well into the 20th century. I'm sure many older readers will remember 'Weary Willie' and 'Tired Tim' in 'Chips', and possibly the 'Comical Capers of Constable Cuddlecock'! Looking at my copies of these comics now, I am amazed at the amount of reading matter and how they did broaden the vocabulary of children: in one edition there were at least seven words for 'laughter' - snigger (usually by an unpleasant character), chortle, chuckle, titter, guffaw, giggle and cackle: each means the same thing but with a subtle difference as to when the word should be used. Apart from the usual 'bubble' speeches in the pictures, there was always a short sentence or two beneath to explain the action and inside at least 20 columns of close print of complete stories and serials -e.g. 'Tug Wilson, the Schoolboy 'Tec'. A more serious publication was 'Boys Own

Paper', price 6d, again twenty or more pages of close print. My copy has a serial by Talbot Reed and another by Jules Verne - 'The Clipper of the Clouds', about a warship which could fly - stories which appealed to the imagination and spirit of adventure. In 1896 came Harmsworth's 'Daily Mail' - a truly popular paper, again with the strong headlines, short paragraphs, and illustrations which form the pattern for all papers today. Described by Lord Salisbury as 'a paper written by office boys for office boys', it became the largest selling paper in Britain.

What of national and world affairs in the period? In 1874 the Prime Minister was Benjamin Disraeli and he faced problems only too familiar to us today: recession and unemployment. There were a number of causes, but the basics were that Britain was no longer the unchallenged industrial power, though she remained the richest and greatest economy. She now faced competition from newly united Germany, an expanding USA and France trying to restore her position after defeat by Germany in 1870. Each of these countries raised trade barriers against British goods while Britain continued with her belief in total freedom of trade. Germany and the USA were able to develop huge sources of coal and iron, using the expertise that Britain had been a century in attaining. More importantly, perhaps, was the massive import of cheap American grain as the Middle West was opened up. Most European countries saw the danger to their farming and stopped American imports. Britain allowed the cheap grain to flood in, so that British farming could no longer compete. The result was a severe depression in the countryside, forcing workers to leave the country for the town, but it also meant much cheaper food, so that though there was unemployment, the workers did not suffer as they might have done in the past. Britain became the only country dependent on imported food: she was always only three months from starvation and therefore, despite her great wealth, the most vulnerable country in Europe. Her Navy was now a vital necessity to keep those trade routes open and she dared not quarrel with her major food supplier, the USA.

What was the answer to these new circumstances? Disraeli conceived the idea of 'Imperialism' - the building of a large overseas empire. Britain already had an empire, but it was not seen as vital to our interests: Canada, Australia and New Zealand were self-governing dominions, loyal to Britain but having little real contact with her. Disraeli's plan was to establish an empire which would be a market for British goods and at the same time supply Britain with the food and raw materials vital for her industry. The key to his plan was to be India. In 1875 Britain bought a half share in the Suez Canal for £4 million, opening a short sea route to India. India was to be a co-equal with Britain, with its own Army, Navy and Civil Service, ruled by the Viceroy with an elected parliament. In 1877, much to her delight, Victoria was created Empress of India, the ruling princes of India swearing allegiance to her. From India Britain would dominate the Far East. In the 1880's came the 'Scramble for Africa'. Stanley's explorations had revealed to Europe the massive untapped wealth of Africa - gold, diamonds, copper, aluminium, zinc. Tales were also told of the backwardness of the natives, tribal wars, slavery, etc. Thus there was a great moral justification to move in to improve the lives of the people, bringing them the benefits of Western civilisation, and at the same time, of course, to develop the untapped wealth waiting there. The drive for colonies took place peacefully and Britain with her Navy obtained the lion's share occupying huge areas in both East and West, plus much of the South of the continent. Britain now gloried in her empire, covering more than a quarter of the world. It gave great pride to see huge areas of the map coloured red, but it was to lead to great problems in the future.

Inevitably, empire-building led to wars: to go into the causes and results of all these wars would be far too much for this article. Suffice it to say that between 1874 and 1899 Britain found herself at war with African tribes - the Matabele, the Zulus, the Ashanti; with the Dutch Boers of South Africa (twice); with the Dervishes in the Sudan; with Egypt; in

Afghanistan; and numerous 'police actions' in Abyssinia, Nepal, China. In all of these areas victory was won chiefly because of the ability of the Navy to bring pressure to bear anywhere in the world and at the same time prevent others from interfering. Britain also was in danger of going to war with Russia, France, the USA, and even Germany. The crisis with Russia in 1878 brought a new word into the language - 'Jingoism', from a music hall song:

"We don't want to fight, but by jingo if we do,  
We've got the ships, we've got the men, we've got the money too."

Germany had always been seen as a friend, Britain's traditional enemies being France and Russia. In 1880 Victoria's son-in-law, the Emperor Frederick, died of cancer. He loved Britain and had he lived history might have been different. He was succeeded by his son, Victoria's eldest grandchild, William II, who became the new Kaiser. A complex, mercurial, man, he had a love-hatred of Britain, wanting always both to emulate and to surpass her. In 1896 he had expressed his support for the Boers in their quarrel with Britain and implied active German help. Britain immediately put a 'Flying Squadron' of battleships and cruisers into the Atlantic. These were spare ships, unattached to any of her many fleets scattered about the world - but they were stronger than the Imperial German Navy! The Kaiser was humiliated and gave orders to build a comparable Navy for Germany. In 1887 and 1897 Victoria had celebrated her Jubilees, when Britain's power and wealth were displayed. Her relatives sat on every throne in Europe, her empire was one on which 'the sun never set', covering more than a quarter of the world, and in 1897 visitors to Portsmouth saw her review a Home Fleet consisting of more than 30 miles of warships drawn up in lines each of which was more than six miles in length. Britain still revelled in 'splendid isolation', but many of her leaders were realising that though strong and rich we did not have a friend in the world, and indeed some countries positively hated us. At that review in 1897 there appeared a small ship moving through the fleet at more than 30 knots: "The Turbinia", using new turbine engines showed the future - all that mighty fleet was, in fact, now effectively out-of-date. Britain's great Naval lead over her rivals could now be eliminated. Britain faced the new century with some misgivings: the former confidence was weakening - she would not dominate the new century as she had done the 19th.