

# THE VICTORIAN HOME

In 1837, the eighteen-year-old Princess Victoria became Queen of England. The ornate style of architecture and decoration that was popular during her reign (from 1837 to 1901) has been called “Victorian.”

The house and rooms that you will see throughout this section of the curriculum are not meant to document one particular building (i.e. Copshaholm), but rather to represent several phases of Victorian style. The rooms that are detailed in this curriculum are from a rather grand lifestyle, at least from an upper-middle class home. It must be remembered that there would have been many homes much grander and many homes much poorer during the Victorian era, just as there are today.

There were many distinct style trends in Victorian architecture. Some of the main ones were **Queen Anne Revival, Romanesque Revival, Italianate, Stick (or Eastlake), Second Empire and Carpenter Gothic**. Architects of the time often combined two or three styles in one house, creating the fanciful and totally original houses that some critics have referred to as from “the dark ages of architecture” or the period of the “collapse of taste.”

The house at the right combines the simple, straightforward lines of the Italianate style with such Second Empire features as a mansard roof and dormer windows. The window that projects to the left of the house on the lower floor is called a bay window. It directs more light into a room because of its three sides. The arched window over the front door is known as a fanlight. It helps bring more light into the typically long and dark entrance hallway.



## THE FRONT PORCH (ALSO CALLED THE VERANDA)

The Victorians considered living outdoors to be very healthy. Most homes had front porches that became outdoor living rooms on warm spring and summer afternoons or evenings.

Wicker furniture and rocking chairs were popular. For large parties, they would even move out some of the parlor furniture and rugs!

Houseplants were placed outside on pedestal tables or on ornate plant stands.

Embellishments were so popular that delicately etched glass windows appeared in everyone's hallway doors.

The pace of life was much slower than it is now, and Victorians would spend many summer evenings on their porches counting shooting stars and exchanging stories and gossip. The evening hours slipped away as the men puffed on cigars and the ladies and children sipped glasses of lemonade.

## THE FRONT HALLWAY

For many years the hallway was considered a mere passageway or tunnel leading to more important rooms, but during the later years of the Victorian era, people started treating the hall as a room in itself.

There were pieces of furniture in the hall where the family and visitors could hang their coats and hats. Some furniture was so elaborate that it was designed to hold an umbrella. Most had mirrors to help the ladies and gentlemen adjust their hats.

The walls were covered with family photographs and there would be expensive pieces of artwork also hung upon the walls.

Any lamps in the hallway were typically adorned with lampshades that were crafted by the lady of the house. These lampshades were made of ruffled silk and sometimes were heavily decorated with beading or ribbons, making them look like fashionable ladies' hats.

## THE PARLOR OR SITTING ROOM

The parlor or sitting room was the showplace of the Victorian home. There was usually a plush-covered round table in the center of the room. On these tables, displays of tiny-framed photos and a plate to hold calling cards would be placed. If visitors came to call and found no one at home, they would leave their calling cards with the maid or butler to let the family know that they had been there.

Floral carpets were all the rage. It was the accepted style to combine many patterns together—even striped wallpaper with wild floral fabrics and carpets! The arms of the over-stuffed chair sporting handmade lace doilies.

The Victorians covered their wall with paintings, prints and family portraits. On the mantle of the fireplace you might have seen wax flowers under glass domes.

## THE LIBRARY

The most serious room in a Victorian house was the library or study. It was here that the business of running the household was conducted. A large desk situated in the room would hold books and ledgers for maintaining household records and accounts. Here the lady of the house would conduct her correspondence and enter additions to her diary, which was probably kept in one of the smaller drawers in the desk.

An elaborate bookcase would hold leather-bound editions of reference books, dictionaries and classics of literature. One of the tables in the library may have held the family Bible in which it was the custom to enter family history on blank pages and flyleaves.

A fireplace would burn wood, but coal was added later. The coal would be kept in a fanciful scuttle to the left of the fireplace. The comfortable armchairs were used for cozy reading in the afternoons and evenings.

The chandelier was lit by gas, whereas lamps on the table and on the fireplace mantle were lit by kerosene. Gas was piped into homes for lighting, but it was commonly used in combination with kerosene lamps and candles. The crystal pendants on kerosene lamps were functional as well as ornamental since they help to intensify and reflect light.

## THE DINING ROOM

The most outstanding feature of a Victorian dining room was the sideboard. Although elaborately carved and heavily ornamented, the sideboard served a practical purpose. The family silverware and table linens were stored in its drawers. The “Sunday best” china and crystal glasses were put on display on its shelves. Even the mirrors on the sideboard served the useful purpose of reflecting light from the candelabra.

During a large meal like Sunday dinner, the silver serving platters were arranged on the sideboard to keep the table uncluttered.

The window hangings in Victorian homes were often very complex arrangements of two and three layers of cloth. The under curtain of lightweight fabric like organdy allows light into the house. The outer-curtains, of very heavy and dense velvet, were drawn shut at night to afford privacy and to help eliminate cold drafts. These drapes were so heavy that it often took two men to hang them up again after spring housecleaning.

## THE KITCHEN

By the latter part of the Victorian era, the majority of kitchens had hot and cold running water and sinks. Iceboxes were just that-wooden cabinets with a shelf for blocks of ice to keep food cold.

Gas ovens were available but were not as popular as the old wood and coal stoves that were hooked up to a hot water tank so there was no waiting for hot water.

The floor was wooden except for the tiled area around the stove to protect against fire. Kitchen floors were kept bare so that it was easy to clean them.

## THE GAZEBO AND FLOWER GARDEN

Fresh floral arrangements were considered a necessity in Victorian homes. The lady of the house raised a variety of flowers in her backyard. The gazebo provided a nice shaded area for admiring the garden on sunny days.

The Victorians' interest in flowers was not just restricted to love of their color and form. They also assigned various traits and meanings to each flower. When someone was presented with a special bouquet of flowers, all of the floral meanings fit together into a message. It was a rather formal era and people sometimes used flowers to express their feelings, instead of verbalizing them.

Here is a list of the flowers and the meanings that Victorians assigned to them, taken from *Flower Lore* by Miss Carruthers of Inverness, published in 1879.

Anemone: brevity	Marigold: sorrow
Belladonna: fatal	Mistletoe: surmounting difficulties
Camellia: excellence	Narcissus: egotism
Carnation: admiration	Olive: peace, security
Cherry blossom: education	Pansy: thought
Crocus: youthful gladness	Peach blossom: a bride
Daffodil: regard	Poppy: sleep, consolation
Daisy: innocence	Roses: passionate love
Edelweiss: daring, courage	Sunflower: pride, riches
Fern: fascination	Sweet pea: departure
Forget-me-not: forget me not	Tulip: ardent love
Grass: usefulness	Violet: steadfastness
Holly: good wishes	Willow: forsaken love
Iris: hope	Zinnia: thoughts of absent friends
Ivy: fidelity	
Lily of the valley: return of happiness	

## THE MASTER BEDROOM

The massive Renaissance-style bedroom suite could have been carved from walnut and walnut burl. Usually dressers and nightstands were topped with marble. The bed was high off the floor because of early morning drafts (after the fire in the fireplace had died down).

## A GIRL'S BEDROOM

Painted furniture was known as "cottage" furniture and was considered suitable only for informal use. A girl's bedroom would feature a whole set of cottage furniture with each piece hand-painted and stenciled in a floral motif. Some girls had a sleigh bed (because it resembled a horse-drawn sleigh).

Victorian girls were encouraged to become versed in all the arts and handicrafts, not as part of some career, but to help make them cultured young ladies.

Dollhouses were popular toys. Parents approved of dollhouse play because they felt it would help their daughters become organized and "house-proud" young women.

Popular, also, were dolls in all sizes made from all kinds of materials. The china or porcelain dolls were often "Sunday Dolls," kept in glass cases all week and only brought out on Sundays or holidays.

## A BOY'S BEDROOM

Victorian parents were strict and demanding with their children. Rigid study and lessons were enforced each day except Sunday, when religious pursuits were encouraged. Usually desks in a boy's bedroom were full of schoolbooks and papers.

Still, there was time to play. The rocking horse was a favorite toy in Victorian times, as it has been for centuries. Victorian boys, wearing paper hats and waving tiny swords, climbed on their horses and rocked off to imaginary battles. Tin soldiers were immensely popular, as were model train sets.

## THE BATHROOM

The first bathrooms were found only in upper-class homes because plumbing and fixtures were very expensive. Most Americans still used the old hip tub for their Sunday night baths, lugging buckets of hot and cold water to get the temperature just right. Its no wonder people took only one bath a week!

The bathtub in most Victorian homes was attached to an ornate gas water heater, thought by some to bring modern improvements to the bath. But these early gas contraptions had a nasty tendency to explode, causing prudent buyers to shy away from

using them. Often, just cold water was piped into the bathroom and water was heated in the kitchen to be carried up for hot baths. Most Victorian bathrooms were elaborately tiled with porcelain tiles.

The toilet or water closet (also called the “W.C.”) was invented by an Englishman in 1596, but didn’t really catch on in America until metal pipe became readily available in the 1860s.

The early toilets gave off an awful stench because the water trap had not yet been designed. The water trap is the ingenious turn in the toilet pipe that prevents the smelly sewer gas from working its way up into the house from below. Even with the water trap, many people thought it terribly unsanitary for the outhouse to be brought inside. They warned about the dangers of sewer gas, claiming that it caused deaths! It was because of these fears that the toilet was, in some Victorian homes, separated from the bathroom and placed in its own room: the water closet. Some toilets were often decorated and sculpted.

## THE ATTIC

Unlike the dark, tiny crawl spaces we call attics today, Victorian attics were large, often comfortable areas, fairly well lit by windows. Very often, part of the attic was used to store rugs and furniture, while the rest was used as living quarters for the servants.

Often, a married couple would be hired to serve as cook and butler to the household. Between them, they were responsible for all the cooking, cleaning and general maintenance of the house. Of course, a large household would have employed more than just two servants. It was not an easy life, for their work was strenuous and time-consuming, but they were given room and board, in addition to a modest salary. Some couples saved enough money over the years to retire from service and start their own households.

A sewing machine would be located in the attic (or on the top floor of the house). The servants and the ladies of the household did routine mending. When the lady or her children needed new clothes, visiting seamstresses would come to the house to design and sew new apparel. If a grand wedding was being planned, seamstresses would often stay with the household for several months preparing the ladies’ gowns and clothes for the children. Gentlemen and older boys generally ordered and purchased their cloths at a tailor’s shop.

Old clothes and fabric scraps were never thrown away as they could be cleverly used again. Both quilts and braided rugs were made from recycled fabrics.

## THE BASEMENT

Today we use our basements as catchalls to store all kinds of things that we are not currently using or that we intend to dispose of eventually. Sometime part of the cellar is converted into a game room with a Ping-Pong table and dartboards.

The basement was a very practical area in the Victorian home. Very often a second wood and/or coal burning stove and a sink area were installed in the basement so the cook could preserve fruits and vegetables and bake during the summer without heating the rest of the house.

It was also an area where all the clothes were washed and ironed. In 1858, Hamilton Smith patented the first mechanical washing machine. Until then, women had the backbreaking chore of scrubbing all clothes and linens by hand. Imagine trying to scrub out something as big as a bed sheet!

Ironing was also a chore. Though pretty much the same shape as today's irons, most old-fashioned irons were heated by being placed on a hot stovetop and a few by being filled with hot coals. It was hard to regulate the iron's heat. Women had to be very keen about continually testing the iron with a finger so it wouldn't scorch the fabric. Since the 'no-iron' miracle fabrics we have today didn't exist then, everything they washed had to be ironed!

## THE CARRIAGE HOUSE

Just as we have garages today for our cars, the Victorians had carriage houses for their horses and buggies.

The carriage house was often a good-sized building and usually included a tiny apartment on the second floor to house the stable boy. It was the stable boy's job to feed and groom the horses, keep the buggy shiny and the horse stalls clean. Sometimes he also acted as the chauffeur.

There were automobiles in the late Victorian era but they were so rare that in the mid-1890s the Barnum & Bailey Circus displayed an auto as its main oddity. Even in 1900 there were only 8000 cars in use and roads were in such rough shape that it was many years until cars became practical.

In areas where there was often a lot of ice and snow, the family would own a sleigh to be used instead of a buggy during the winter months.

The flower or vegetable garden was close to the carriage house so the stable boy could work the hay and manure sweepings from the stables into the garden soil.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Some material borrowed from [The Victorian House Coloring Book](#) by Kristin Helberg, 1980.