The early Victorian age
From 1837 to 1861
The early Victorian age

1837 Queen Victoria comes to the throne

1842 Opening of the Great Western Railway

1847 Publication of *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë

1853-56 The Crimean War

1838 People’s Charter calls for social reforms

1840 Marriage of Queen Victoria to Prince Albert

1843 Charles Dickens publishes *A Christmas Carol*

1851 The Great Exhibition opens at Crystal Palace

1861 Prince Albert dies; Civil War begins in America
1. The young life of Victoria

• Victoria was born on 24th May 1819 in the middle of a **succession crisis**.

• Her mother was convinced that Victoria would become queen. So she started the **‘Kensington System’**, a cruel regime of **control**.

• **20 June 1837** King William the IV died: the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Lord Chancellor knelt to her and told her that she was Queen.

‘I shall ever remember this day as the proudest of my life’
2. Victoria and Albert

- Victoria and Albert **married** in February **1840**. They were extremely devoted and had nine children.

- When Victoria became so visibly pregnant that she could not appear in official ceremonies, **Albert took on her functions**. He was her main advisor.

- Albert supported reform but in December **1861** he **died** suddenly at the age of 42.

- In memory of her beloved husband she had the **Albert Memorial (1876)** built in London.
The early Victorian age

3. The Great Exhibition

Housed in the Crystal Palace, in Hyde Park, 1851

- Increasing power of the middle classes
- Expansion of industry and trade
- Scientific and technological developments
The early Victorian age

3. The Great Exhibition

Its grandeur does not consist in one thing, but in the unique assemblage of all things. Whatever human industry has created you find there …

… as if none but supernatural hands could have arranged this, with such a blaze and contrast of colours and marvellous power of effect. (Charlotte Brontë)

… It may be called a bazaar or a fair… It seems as if only magic could have gathered this mass of wealth from all the ends of the earth …
The early Victorian age

4. Railways

- In 1804 Richard Trevithick opened up the possibility of making a steam engine move itself.
- In 1825 Stephenson created a proper steam locomotive pulling wagons for the first time: he is considered the father of the railways.
- ‘Railway Mania’: in 1845, 240 acts were passed. This led to the construction of 4600 miles of track.
The early Victorian age

5. Victorian London

- Victorians often revived previous styles.
- Classical forms were preferred for civic and public buildings, like government offices, town halls. Gothic ones for ecclesiastical and domestic works.
- After 1855 the Gothic revival prevailed over the classical faction.

The Victoria and Albert Museum

The British Museum

Buckingham Palace
6. Life in the Victorian town

Problems linked to:
• overcrowded urban environment;
• high death rate;
• terrible working conditions in polluted atmospheres;
• cholera epidemics and tuberculosis.

Radical change in medicine:
• professional organisations were founded;
• modern hospitals were built.
7. Christmas

Decline due to Puritans and Industrial Revolution.

Revival due to: **Charles Dickens** with *A Christmas Carol* and Prince Albert.

Victorian innovations:
- decorating the **Christmas tree**
- first **Christmas card** in the 1840’s;
- singing of **Christmas carols**, like the popular ‘Silent Night’;
- **exploitation** of Christmas for commercial purposes.

‘I will honour Christmas in my heart and I will try to keep it with me all year’ (Charles Dickens)
8. The Victorian compromise

- The Victorians were great **moralisers**
  - they supported: personal duty, hard work, decorum, respectability, chastity.

- ‘**Victorian**’, synonymous with **prude**, stood for extreme repression; even furniture legs had to be concealed under heavy cloth not to be ‘**suggestive**’.

- New ideas were discussed and debated by a large part of society.
8. The Victorian compromise

- The powerful middle-class was obsessed with gentility, decorum.

**Decorum** → strict ideas about authority

a. Victorian private lives dominated by an authoritarian father.

b. Women were subject to male authority; they were expected to marry and make home a ‘refuge’ for their husbands.
9. New currents of thought

**Evangelicalism**
- strict code of behaviour
- dedication to humanitarian causes and social reforms
- base of Victorian emphasis upon moral conduct

**Utilitarianism**
- neglected human and cultural values
- any problem could be overcome by reason
- usefulness, happiness, avoidance of pain

**Empiricism**
- legislation should try to help men develop their natural talents
- progress came from mental energy
- supported popular education, trade union organisation, extension of representation to all citizens, and the emancipation of women

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John Wesley (1703-1791), the founder of Methodism

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), philosopher

Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), theorist
The voice of the omniscient narrator provided a comment on the plot and erected a rigid barrier between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, light and darkness.

The setting chosen by most Victorian novelists was the city, which was the main symbol of the industrial civilisation as well as the expression of anonymous lives and lost identities.

Victorian writers concentrated on the creation of characters and achieved deeper analysis of the characters’ inner life.

Retribution and punishment were to be found in the final chapter, where the whole texture of events, adventures, incidents had to be explained and justified.