

Victorian cities

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There were cities in Britain in Roman times, but the large conurbations that grew up during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901) had notable features that distinguished them from earlier cities

The Romans had the concept of an *urbs* – a centre of **civil administration**, where one or more high-ranking individuals lived. These were likely to be located near a major road junction or river network for ease of communications. *Urbs* is translated into English as ‘city’. Later, in the Middle Ages, major settlements such as London, York, Bristol and Norwich grew and flourished both in terms of population and in trade. These were known as cities.

Diversity came from **immigration**, with modern surname analysis of old documents showing a wide range of incomers at that time. Many new arrivals had left agricultural occupations in the countryside to take up work in the many trades that cities provided. There was also international immigration. York, for example, saw migrants from Germany and the Netherlands and the land we now call Belgium. Some of these overseas arrivals were weavers, while others were metal workers.

Bristol became famous as a trading port, with exports of woollen items being important, and imports of Spanish and Portuguese wine increasing the city’s cosmopolitan nature. Norwich’s extensive cloth industry and commercial connections to mainland Europe led to its medieval boom. Further north, it was the trade in wool and leather goods that allowed Edinburgh to become Scotland’s prosperous capital city.

Manufacturing industries

The common perception of a city being a settlement with a significantly high population, important civic buildings and other infrastructure started to appear in Britain during the **Industrial Revolution**, beginning around the middle of the 1700s and reaching its peak in the Victorian period. This was a fundamentally important time in British history.

A narrow range of **manufacturing industries** developed from new technologies, including steam-powered machines, and became concentrated in certain areas. Examples of these are:

- cotton textile production in the north-west of England around Manchester
- metalworking in the West Midlands around Birmingham
- coal and iron exports from Cardiff
- shipbuilding in Newcastle
- textiles in Dundee.

Millions of farm workers moved from the countryside to begin industrial jobs, so while cities boomed, rural areas became depopulated.

Trade and the British Empire

Alongside the revolution in manufacturing was growth in overseas trade, which became a hugely important factor in Britain's overall growth. In Ireland, as manufactured goods were exchanged for the raw materials and foodstuffs that the expanding industries and population needed, the port cities of Dublin, Waterford, Cork and Limerick thrived as export and import centres, as did London, Bristol and Liverpool in England. The connection to the British Empire was central to this expansion, with markets in all parts of the world receiving and providing goods, raw materials and people.

The **British Empire** led to the development of overseas cities. An example is the Indian settlement of Kalikata, which was developed, with the permission of the Mughal emperor, into Calcutta – the capital city of British India. Similarly in Southeast Asia, Singapore was developed by the British into a significant trading city. Across the globe, during European exploitation of land, minerals, plants and people, cities grew into sites of significance that in the modern day are usually national capital cities or **regional capitals**. After Britain took control of the land now known as Australia from the indigenous people, the settlement of Sydney, which the British first used as a destination for transported prisoners, grew into a city with a population of nearly half a million mainly British **emigrants** by the end of Queen Victoria's reign. This was stimulated by the discovery of gold in 1851 and development of farming in the land beyond the city limits. Sydney became the state capital of New South Wales shortly before Queen Victoria died in 1901.

While the movement of people within the British Empire was mostly away from Britain and out to the colonies and dominions, during the nineteenth century there was some significant **immigration** to Britain. A population of about 15,000 Germans had made their home in London by 1871, with another 15,000 Germans finding places in other cities including Bradford and Manchester. At the same time, Jewish people suffering persecution in Russia relocated mainly to London, Manchester and Leeds. About 1000 Italians found work related to the shipping opportunities in Cardiff, alongside new residents from Africa, India, the Caribbean and Arabian Peninsula, all drawn to the city by the work generated by the docks.

Infrastructure and city status

Prosperity was reflected in cities' growing, impressive **civic infrastructure**. Liverpool docks, which opened in 1846, were huge and significantly reduced the time taken to unload ships and turn them around. The centre of Newcastle upon Tyne was greatly altered and improved during the first half of the nineteenth century, including new streets, civic buildings and a railway station. The latter part of the nineteenth century saw the building of many fine civic structures in cities around Britain, notably the National Museum and City Hall in Cardiff, the Liver Building in Liverpool, Central Library and Grand Opera House in Belfast and Glasgow's magnificent City Chambers. The prominence of these constructions indicated both the importance of the cities in administering local matters and in reflecting local people's vision of their prestige.

An indicator of **city status** is a university, although it is true that some towns, such as St Andrews in Scotland, have well-established universities but do not have city status. Some cities, such as Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh and Dublin, have universities that are centuries old, but nineteenth-century universities were established in numerous cities such as Cardiff, Durham, Nottingham and London.

Another indicator of city status is a cathedral. Usually with ancient roots, the Victorian cathedral in Truro was begun in 1880, following city status being granted in 1877, and the location chosen was the

medieval site of St Mary's parish church. Most medieval cathedrals underwent major restorations during the Victorian period and are usually pointed out in tourist guides. For example, the online guide to Exeter Cathedral highlights its nineteenth-century stained-glass windows (<https://tinyurl.com/Exeter-cathedral>). These large, significant cultural landmarks often have roles to play in local celebrations and commemorations.

Administration

The administration of cities was carried out by a range of men with a higher status than most of the local population. Early in the Victorian period, Liverpool, for example, was governed by a 'corporation' consisting of the mayor, aldermen and burgesses, who were wealthy tradesmen and local nobility. When Liverpool gained city status in 1880, the corporation became known as the city council. In 1893, Liverpool was granted the right to elect a lord mayor, signifying the importance of this northern city to the prosperity of Britain.

An important role of the city council was to deal with the increasing health and hygiene issues that arose from increasing population and overcrowding in the older parts of the cities. New **suburbs** were agreed on by the city councillors and sprang up around the city edges, providing much-needed housing. Liverpool saw large estates of terraced dwellings spreading out from the city centre and investigation of nineteenth-century census documents shows that residents in the suburbs were the new, lower-middle classes, such as nurses, shopkeepers, office workers and commercial travellers. However, further away from the city centre the suburbs tended to be more genteel, with semi-detached or detached houses, gardens and tree-lined boulevards. Residents there were the wealthier middle classes – typically doctors, lawyers, bank managers, factory supervisors and college staff. Travel to work was enabled by **technological change**. In the mid-Victorian age there were horse-drawn omnibuses linking the suburbs to the city centre, by the early 1880s there were horse-drawn trams on rails, and by the end of the Victorian period, electric trams were serving the suburbs.

The Liverpool corporation commissioned a new reservoir for fresh water in 1877 and the new city council oversaw its opening in 1889. The city council also directed the construction of parks, a new cemetery, spaces for leisure such as cricket grounds and football pitches, and roads. Meanwhile, in the urban centre, near the docks, dwellings decayed and became slum-like. They housed the poorer working classes, such as dock workers, cart drivers, labourers and charwomen. These poor areas were not cleared and replaced until the twentieth century. The same picture of growth in some areas and decay in others was seen in cities around the country.

Conclusion

Cities had existed in Britain since Roman times, and by the Victorian period they shared certain key features that resulted from nineteenth-century growth and development. These included a large population, the building of prestigious buildings, the establishment of governing bodies consisting of high-ranking individuals, vigorous trade and manufacturing features, places for export and import and elements of emigration and immigration.

Glossary

British Empire Worldwide system of territories, colonies and dominions that were ruled by Britain from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century.

City status A mark of prestige or level of importance.

Civic infrastructure Physical structures that support a community's public life, such as libraries, parks and transportation networks.

Civil administration The system of managing public affairs in a community.

Emigrant A person who leaves their own country in order to settle permanently in another.

Immigration The movement of people into a new area with the intent to reside in that area.

Industrial Revolution The transformation of society from one dominated by farming and work in the countryside to domination by manufacturing processes, associated with the growth of cities.

Manufacturing industries Workplaces that transform raw materials into finished goods in factories.

Regional capital The main administrative city in a large geographical area.

Suburb A residential area located on the outskirts of a city.

Technological change The process of inventing new products and processes and spreading them through society.

Questions for discussion

- 1 What were the similarities and differences between medieval and Victorian cities?
- 2 How did the development of the British Empire affect Victorian cities?
- 3 To what extent did technological change influence the growth of Victorian cities?

Resources

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