

Washday Blues

Objects which relate to Victorian laundry work. Many of the items included in this box would have been in use in households well into the twentieth Century.

Links to QCA schemes of work

Unit 11 What was it like for children living in Victorian Britain.

Unit 12 How did life change in our locality in Victorian times.

Dolly tub, dolly peg, laundry posser, stirrer, wooden pegs, flat iron, box iron and cap iron, soap, dolly blue box and dolly blue bag.

Monday was 'Laundry Day', also known as 'Blue Monday'. Soaking had already begun well before, as early as Saturday night for those whose religious beliefs forbade them from any type of work or labour on Sunday. On Monday the dolly tub was filled with hot water for washing the clothes. The tub was originally made from wood but galvanised steel became popular because it was lighter and therefore easier to empty. The dolly tub needed to be



filled and emptied many times on washday. The dolly peg was made from wood and had 4 or 5 legs. It was turned backwards and forwards in the dolly tub to move the clothes around and get them clean. Housekeepers said the dolly peg should be turned 100 times for each item of washing! The posser had a copper cone at one end and again was used to agitate the clothes.



Carbolic soap was used in the days before detergents and white laundry went in first as it needed hottest water. This was removed with tongs and darker items followed.



The laundry was rinsed three times, and in the final rinse a 'dolly blue bag', was added



with white items, to maintain their original brightness. After the **final rinse** everything was put through a **mangle** to squeeze out any **excess water**. The laundry was fed between **two rollers**, usually **made of wood** but sometimes covered with **rubber**, and turned with a **handle** at the **side**. The washing was then hung out to **dry**, sometimes on a line strung across the **street**. When it rained it was dried **indoors** in front of the **fire**, hung over **wooden frames** known as **clothes horses** or **maidens** or on **racks** suspended from the ceiling.



If items, such as caps and men's shirts, needed **starching**, wheat, potatoes and rice were used to produce the starch until it was manufactured commercially in the **1840's**. **Tuesday** was '**Ironing day**'. Shapes of irons



varied dependent on **what** was being **ironed**. The **fa-vourite** iron of the 19th Century, the **sad** [i.e. solid] or flat iron, was used in **pairs**, one iron being in use while the other was heated on a **trivet** over the **stove** or **range**. It was lifted with a cloth when it was **hot**. You had to **spit** on it to test if it was **hot** enough. The shapes of box irons varied but the basic principle remained the same: an **iron slug** was shaped to fit inside the hollow body of the iron, which had either a **hinged** or **sliding** heel on top; only the **slug** was **heated** in the **fire**. The housewife needed only to buy **one** box iron with **two iron slugs**, which could be heated **alternately** on the open fire. The **cap** iron was used for ironing the **crowns** and **brims** of **bonnets** and **caps** and this was why it was **double-pointed**.



The **first electric irons** were introduced in the **1880's** in the **United States**, but they were **heavy** and sometimes **dangerous**. It was not until the **1920's** and **1930's** that electric irons became more **popular**.

Darning mushroom

Made of **wood** and used when socks with holes were actually **darned** and not **thrown away**. The darning mushroom was put **under the hole** and then darned **across** and **down** with wool to **repair the hole**.



Drawers, bloomers and underwear

When Victorian ladies wore their **crinolines** in the **1850's** it was essential for them to wear **drawers** to keep themselves **warm**. Each leg was finished **separately** and joined together at the **waistband** only leaving the crotch seam **open**. The legs tended to be cut straight without a band at the bottom and were **tied** or **buttoned** at the **centre back**. During the **1860's** and **1870's** drawers were shortened to just below knee level. They were sometimes gathered into **kneebands** and often had a hip yoke to reduce fullness at the waist. The version with **kneebands** became known as **knickerbockers** [abbreviated to **knickers**].



In the early Victorian era, an American **Mrs. Amelia Jenks Bloomer** promoted the idea of women abandoning their **petticoats** for **bloomers**, a type of **trouser** which would be easier to wear than their **heavy skirts**. They reached the **ankle**, were **frill cuffed** and worn with a simple **knee length skirt** and **bodice**. They were not very popular but were later adopted as suitable **cycling wear** for ladies.

Victorian children wore a **vast** amount of **underwear** and one girl remembered wearing a **vest**, a **calico chemise** reaching the knees, **stays of wadded pique'** down the back with **additional buttons** at varying levels around the waist to support **drawers**, **stocking suspenders** and a **flannel petticoat**, long black wool or thick **cotton stockings** and over all a white **petticoat** with a **bodice**.

Children from **poorer families** wore **patched** and **mended** clothes that had often been bought **second hand**, then passed down

through the family. Even children from relatively comfortable backgrounds would have owned very few **outfits**:

perhaps **two** for weekdays and **one** for **Sunday** best. The **invention** of the domestic **sewing machine** in **1851** meant that clothes could be made at home **quickly** and **easily**. This was a great help to many, but the **poorest** could not afford them. Some children went **barefoot**, even in **winter**, when they would **pad** their **clothes** with **newspaper** to try to keep **warm**.