

Victorian Voices

For anyone wanting to know about Victorian Leicester there is a huge range of resources. General histories of Leicester cover the period, while Malcolm Elliot's *Victorian Leicester* is an excellent, detailed book. There are also maps, memoirs, diaries, newspapers, magazines, official documents and all the other sources that historians use to investigate the past. This article draws attention to recorded voices of Victorians that are preserved in the East Midlands Oral History Archive (EMOHA), which is based at the University of Leicester.



Figure 1: Miss Kirby lived at 13 West Street (photo: Colin Hyde).

Miss Bertha Kirby (b.1889) was born in Leicester and was interviewed by Mr JFL Nord, who was the Keeper of Antiquities for Leicester City Council, in 1965. Miss Kirby lived on West Street and, as a child, was often sent to what is now Mandela Park to pick up sheep droppings for the garden. She recalls:

“When we came to live here, our greatest horror and annoyance always occurred on a Wednesday, cattle market day, because the cows and sheep and pigs were all driven through the streets and they came up Waterloo Street and down Newtown or West Street to go to the Welford Road cattle market, all driven by perhaps one man and then a number of boys. Each boy had a big stick

and shouted at the animals and hit them or stood with their arms out to prevent them going down a wrong turning. To us it was very terrifying to have to walk amid these poor cows as we went to school. We didn't enjoy it a bit.”

As a small child Miss Kirby also lived in the Market Place:

“The soldiers, red-coated soldiers, always drilled and marched in the Market Place on a Sunday morning. We used to stand behind the bars at our nursery windows, mother holding our petticoats, and watch these soldiers. Well, when the Boer War came, we were taken into Market Street to a Mrs Brightland's. She had a large ladies clothing business there. The shop windows were emptied and we sat on chairs in the window and watched all the red-coated soldiers march through the town on their way to South Africa. They were in ranks of fours, some were mounted - and guns - most of the soldiers were on foot. Well now, when the Boer War was over, again we went to that same shop in Market Street and what men, and what horses, were left were again paraded. There were whole rows with not a man in it, a horse without a rider, a horse, a soldier but no horse, and these gaps were exposed all the way along. Well, I can't find anybody else who saw that... but we certainly saw it on the first and the second occasion. But the second time when the men came back they wore khaki, there were no more red coats.”



Figure 2: Miss Kirby's father ran his business from the family home at 52 Market Place (photo: Colin Hyde).

[Have a look at EMOHA's blog](#) for a full transcript of Miss Kirby's recording:

In 1967 Radio Leicester recorded a history of the Tigers regiment and interviewed a survivor, possibly a Mr Eato, of the siege of Ladysmith. Unfortunately, only the brief excerpts used in the programme survive, but the soldier's voice is an excellent example of an 'old' Leicester accent.

"It was very rough in Ladysmith because we never knew when we were going to get out. You see, we'd come down to one biscuit, a pint of water, and a pound of horse flesh a day. Well, then they dropped the biscuit. We got no biscuits, so we dropped down then to a pint of water and a pound of horse flesh a day. Stripped, I was 12 stone 8, and after the end of the siege I was under 9 stone. But you could walk about the place and you wouldn't know your own brother."

In the 1970s Radio Leicester's station manager Owen Bentley recorded Jennifer Baines in Barkby. Mrs Baines' was born in 1879 and had strong memories of rural poverty in Barkby in the 1880s and '90s.

"When I was little, we lived in a, it was only like a cow shed as we lived in. We had to go upstairs, up the ladder, through the trap door to get to the bedroom."



Figure 2: Barkby, 2003 (photo: Colin Hyde).

"How many of you slept in a bed?"

"Oh, mostly about four or five on us, all used to snuggle up against one another. She (mother) never bothered about a bed for us. We had to do the best we could. But she used to always send us to farmhouses for the sack bags. She had a bed herself to lay on."

"So you weren't on a bed at all? You were just on sacks."

"On sacks. You used to lay on the floor and you used to cover us over with old coats or anything. But there were only thatched houses. And then they started to pull them down. These here old thatched houses. (We) went out of one house into another till they come to the end. And then they made a shop at the corner."

The extent of pre-WW1 drinking can be gauged from these memories of George Draper (b.1890):

"I got a job at Harry Bantons's place, he was a farrier in Silver Street next door to the Royal Oak Arcade in Silver Street. Going up towards Cart Lane was Pallets, paper bag people, and there was a blacksmith's forge there. That was where I was apprenticed. Incidentally, I used to have to get up at half past five in the morning. My first call was in Newark Street at RC Allen's, they were bottlers of one thing or another, and pick up two horses. Used to ride one, lead the other to the shop in Silver Street.

"My next job, after taking the horses in the shop and tying them up, was to go to the forge, put my hand on the top, get a two shilling piece - there was always money where different people used to come in and leave us money - and go to The Globe at the corner of Carts Lane. I think I was their first customer, I was always on the step there at six o'clock with a big enamel jug for a gallon of ale. That gallon jug was filled about four times before eight o'clock, and I used to have my share, used to drink enough beer to float a blooming battleship, as a lad, because after eight o'clock when I took the horses back to whichever place we went, there were nearly always a bottle of Guinness in the corner of the manger for me. By lunchtime, I dare say I'd had seven or eight pints, I suspect. And for a lad of 14, that wasn't doing too bad."

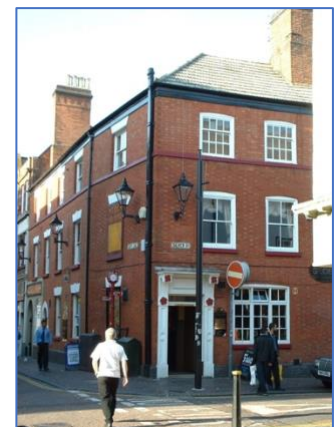


Figure 3: The Globe, Silver Street, 2003 (photo: Colin Hyde).

As well as recordings of Victorians, EMOHA also has the recordings Prof. Jack Simmons made for Radio Leicester when he presented a series that was also published as a book, *Life in Victorian Leicester*. Three of EMOHA's online exhibitions feature Victorian voices. *Victorian Schooldays*, *Growing-Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian Leicester*, and the *First World War Remembered* all feature people born in the 19th century.

There are links to these exhibitions and others on [the EMOHA website](#).

Recent Leicester Group Activities

Leicester's Board Schools

AGM and a talk by Neil Crutchley on 3rd February 2026.

Large red brick Board schools can be seen across Leicester. Neil explained how and why these temples of education came to be built. The talk started by looking at the 'Good and Great' who sat on the school board committees - notable worthies such as David Vaughan and James Ellis. Members had to be voted onto the boards, and while it was important how potential members viewed the teaching of religion, the Boards were made up of Liberals, Secularists, Church of England and non-conformists. Only three women sat on the boards.

Neil talked about the development of state-funded education and the building of the schools. These gradually developed from early Gothic-influenced buildings to the large Queen Anne style schools of the 1880s, such as Hazel Street (1882). Many of these were designed by Edward Burgess, who was also responsible for the design of several of Leicester's best coffee houses.

The talk was illustrated with excellent photos by Neil and Peter Ellis, which emphasised how fortunate Leicester was, and is, to have so many well-designed places of education, many of which have survived to this day. Several are still being used as schools while others have become community centres. They remain an important feature of Leicester's townscape.

The History of Brookfield

A talk by Emma Probett on 3rd March 2026.

The suburb of Stoneygate started to be developed from the 1840s, which was when the original house at Brookfield was first remodelled (1846). Emma's thorough talk introduced us to wealthy industrialist Thomas Fielding Johnson, who bought the house in 1869 and had it remodelled again by the Goddard practise in 1877. This was an early example of the English domestic revival style on a house in Leicester (think of black and white gables in Tudor style). It was here that Fielding Johnson told Dr Astley Clarke that he had bought the land on Victoria Park for the foundation of what became the University of Leicester.

In 1924 the house was donated to the Bishop of Leicester and remained in the use of the church until 1940 when the Red Cross used it to create a centre for packing parcels for POWs. It was then used by the Leicester Royal Infirmary for training, eventually becoming the Charles Frears School of Nursing. This merged with De Montfort University in 1995 and was sold to the University of Leicester in 2016. A £16,000,000 refit saw it become the School of Business, which it remains to this day.

Industry and ardour – a brief history of allotments in Leicester

A talk by Cynthia Brown on 7th April 2026.

The Leicester Labourer's Friend Society was established in 1842. Its 'Cottage Garden and Allotment Plan' aimed to alleviate poverty and provide an alternative to charity or poor relief. Allotment societies followed after an Act of Parliament in 1887, and allotments were created in areas such as Freemans Common, Aylestone Road, Victoria Road, and opposite the Bede Meadows Bathing Station (where naked bathers were an occasional distraction). Cynthia's fascinating talk explored the issues around gaining and cultivating land, annual shows and competitions, and the value of allotments during both the world wars. In 1920 there were 16,000 allotment holders and 1,600 acres of land under cultivation. Allotment societies struggled into the 1950s and '60s, but there has been a resurgence in recent years and in Leicester there are currently over 40 sites with over 3,000 plots.

Cynthia has written a history of Leicester's allotments that you can download for free from the [Leicester City Council website](#).

Summer Events

This summer we are running three walks. These are:

Walk 1: In partnership with Leicester Civic Society, Peter Ellis and Colin Hyde are leading a walk *Victorian Leicester – A Townscape to Cherish* on July 25th at 10:30 am – 12:00 pm. Tickets are £6-£8 and booking details are on [the Society's website here](#).

Walk 2: Rowan Roenisch is leading a walk, *Ernest Gimson's early life and influences*, on Tuesday 18th August at 2pm. The walk will start on New Walk and end at the White House on North Avenue in Clarendon Park. This is just over one mile at a gentle walking pace stopping at a range of buildings to point out links to Ernest Gimson's early life, education and influences, including the character of some of Leicester's late nineteenth century architecture and finishing with Ernest Gimson's White House, designed for Arthur, one of his older brothers. Tickets are £5.

Walk 3: Leigh Picciano Moss will lead a walk *Leicester's Cultural Quarter – The Renaissance of St George's* on Thursday 3rd September at 7pm. See how many 19th century buildings have found new uses as Leicester City Council's vision for a cultural quarter is gradually coming to fruition. Tickets are £5.

Walks two and three are bookable on a first-come-first-served basis and you can book a place by contacting Peter Ellis on 01455 291694 or ellisdesign@talktalk.net. Please put 'Victorian Society Booking' as the Subject. Peter will reply with further details of the walks.

Other News and Events

The Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society have a number of local history books they are selling at very reasonable prices. [Follow this link](#) for details of 'Bringing them to their knees: church-building and restoration in Leicestershire and Rutland 1800-1914', by Geoffrey K Brandwood 2002.

Leicester Civic Society are running a series of walks that do not all have a Victorian theme, but which may be of interest to readers. Details are on [their website](#).

If you are interested in knowing more about, or joining, the Victorian Society there are details about the Society and membership on [the Society's website](#).

The recently published list of [Top Ten Endangered Buildings 2026](#) includes the [Derby School of Art, Derby](#). Grade II*, F.W. Waller, 1876 with additions 1899.

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Chair: Colin Hyde. Treasurer: Peter Ellis.

Contact: Peter on 01455 291694 and ellisdesign@talktalk.net; Colin on 0116 2517659 and colinhyde9@yahoo.co.uk

Website: <https://www.victoriansociety.org.uk/regional-groups/leicester/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100066541184338>

X: @LeicVicSoc

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The Victorian Society, 1 Priory Gardens, London W41TT

Contact: [020 8994 1019](tel:02089941019) and admin@victoriansociety.org.uk

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