

Words by **Samuel Hughes**

Why were Victorian elites so effective?

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29 Mins

The biggest empire the world has ever seen was run by a small elite who partied all night, drank liters of port, and stayed in bed until the afternoon.

Books about successful people often make success sound rather unappealing. Education should be intense and rigorous, focused on driving up IQ and on the 'STEM' quaternity of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Once adulthood is reached, life follows an austere pattern, with a 5am start, cold baths, daily visits to the gym, little or no alcohol, a Huel-rich diet, and Stakhanovite working hours. This last point generates particular excitement, and descriptions of powerful people dwell with eager fascination on how many hours they devote to their labors.

The elites of Victorian Britain operated differently. Their schools and universities were not terribly academic and had very little STEM. As adults, they got up late, drank a lot, and spent a remarkable share of their waking hours partying. They loved feasting, sports, holidays, dancing, and dressing up. Contrary to their stodgy reputation, they were probably a lot of fun.

Translate



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Despite this, the elites of nineteenth-century Britain were, by their own lights, extremely successful. For much of the century, Britain was the richest country on Earth. Its companies dominated global commerce, industry and finance. Its huge navy reigned over the world's oceans, and its tiny army won a long sequence of wars while keeping watch over an enormous empire. Britain progressed gradually toward democracy with none of the revolutions and civil wars that wracked continental Europe. There is a longstanding view that the prosperity of Britain's elites came at the cost of the hundreds of millions whom they subordinated and oppressed, and no doubt that is at least partly true. But on their own terms, the British ruling class enjoyed a victorious century.

Maybe the Victorian elite succeeded in *spite* of being feckless and incompetent: the Industrial Revolution created great wealth, which they enjoyed passively and parasitically. We cannot run controlled experiments on Victorian Britain, so this thesis is hard to test. But I want to explore the possibility that a relentless focus on soft skills, team building, and intra-elite networking actually worked rather well. Huel, STEM, and cold baths have their merits. But the example of the Victorians should make us hesitate before concluding that there is only one way to rule the world.

School

Caricaturing a little, we can distinguish two groups in modern educational debates: traditionalists and progressives. Traditionalists think that education should prioritize acquiring knowledge, that it should focus on 'hard' subjects like science, mathematics, and foreign languages, and that it should take place in a highly structured environment, where students' time and behavior are tightly regulated. Progressives think that education should prioritize acquiring skills, that it should embrace 'soft' subjects beyond the supposed academic core, and that students should be given wide freedom in which to develop personally and socially.

One might assume that Victorian education was at the extreme traditionalist end of the spectrum, and modern educational progressives would indeed be horrified by the rote learning and corporal punishment of Victorian schooling. But in respect of all the controversies listed above, elite Victorian schools lean curiously toward the 'progressive' side of the spectrum.

Most socially elite Victorian boys began formal education at the age of seven or eight, spending about five years in a 'preparatory school' before passing on to a 'public school' (which, to the enduring confusion of international observers, is a kind of elite

private school). There was a hierarchy of public schools, with the nine 'Clarendon schools' at the top, and just one, Eton College, clearly at the apex. About 30 percent of nineteenth-century cabinet ministers and 40 percent of prime ministers were Old Etonians.

Most students at both preparatory and public schools were boarders, meaning that elite Victorians were generally sent away from home by the age of eight and spent their childhoods more with peers than with family. In this respect they were distinctive even in their own time: elite families in continental Europe and the United States were far more likely to keep their children at home and educate them at small local private schools. It is plausible that this contributed to the lack of subnational loyalties in the British elite, in contrast to the distinct elites of, for example, the Southern United States, Catalonia in Spain, or Hungary in the Austrian Empire.

The public schools were of course single-sex, generating a somewhat febrile atmosphere in which intense quasi-romantic (or sometimes actually romantic) relationships between boys were common. Perhaps the powerful ties of nostalgia and loyalty that students felt for their former schoolmates were linked to this. The writer Jan Morris said that 'the whole of English upper-class life...was shot through with bisexual instinct' and that 'the public school system...meant that male relationships were full of emotional nuance and

undertone'. Demonstrative affection remained normal in adult life, and it was completely standard for pairs of Victorian men to walk arm-in-arm in public.

Academic life was dominated by Latin and, to a lesser extent, Greek. The exact share varied, but the classical languages took up generally at least half of teaching hours, and sometimes as much as 80 percent, especially earlier in the century. Trailing in third and fourth places were mathematics and modern languages. There was resistance to the teaching of science, not because Victorians were hostile to science in principle, but because they thought it irrelevant to the kind of moral and cultural formation that a school for gentlemen was supposed to provide. Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby School and the leading educationalist of Victorian Britain, remarked that 'rather than have physical science the principal thing in my son's mind, I would gladly have him think that the sun went round the Earth, and that the stars were so many spangles set in the bright blue firmament'. (By contrast, girls were not usually taught classics, meaning that, rather surprisingly, affluent Victorian girls generally followed a more modern curriculum than their brothers.)

Victorian adults had little occasion to use their classical languages, so they tended to forget them. 'I have gladly forgotten all my Latin, and don't ever want to remember it again', wrote the war poet Charles Sorley, one

year after leaving school; at least he did better than Winston Churchill, who remarked that 'In all the twelve years I was at school no one ever succeeded in making me write a Latin verse or learn any Greek except the alphabet'. The most that can be said for Victorians' classical education is perhaps that, like schooling in any difficult subject, it trained students in self-discipline, memorization, and applying rules.

The Victorians themselves occasionally hinted that they regarded the official curriculum of school as something of a MacGuffin. In the hugely influential 1857 novel *Tom Brown's School Days*, Tom's benevolent father muses, 'I don't care a straw for Greek particles... What is [Tom] sent to school for? ... If he'll only turn out a brave, helpful, truth-telling Englishman, and a gentleman, and a Christian, that's all I want'. In a similar spirit, Thomas Arnold wrote that 'what we must look for here is, first, religious and moral principles; second, gentlemanly conduct; thirdly, intellectual ability'.

Under such circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising that the share of time spent in the classroom was relatively modest. At Rugby School, weeks were divided into three 'full days', three 'half days', and Sunday. On a full day, students spent about five hours in the classroom, compared with maybe two hours on a half day. Other schools varied, but nearly all left many hours unfilled. In general, classroom hours were certainly not longer, and probably rather shorter, than those in

and probably rather shorter, than those in normal schools today. They also tended to be shorter than those of contemporary elite schools in France, Germany, or Italy, where the curriculum was normally more academically rigorous.



IMAGE
Pictorial Press via Alamy.

The most prestigious Victorian school was Eton, but the most influential was Rugby, where many of the characteristic features of the Victorian public school were developed under the headmastership of Thomas Arnold. The version of football played at Rugby became known as ‘Rugby football’ and then just ‘rugby’. Here it may be seen in a primitive state, before the rules reached their canonical form.

The focus on character formation led to increasing interest in how students spent their time outside the classroom. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, they were still mostly left to their own devices: their preferred pastime seems to have been roaming the local countryside and generally making a nuisance of themselves. During the

Victorian period, school authorities introduced programs of organized sports, chiefly cricket in summer and various forms of 'football' (including what became rugby) in winter. Many schools ultimately had four, five, or even six afternoons of sports per week: a student would certainly spend ten hours a week on the sports field, and might well spend twenty.

The Victorians thought extremely highly of sports, believing that they instilled team spirit and endurance, fostered mutual loyalty, channeled energy and competitiveness, and taught men how to win and lose graciously. An extreme but not entirely unrepresentative example was Hely Hutchinson Almond, headmaster of Loretto School, who described his school's priorities as 'First – character, second – physique, third – intelligence, fourth – manners, fifth – information'. The cult of team sports was generally not shared in continental Europe, and European visitors were often bewildered by how seriously the English took schoolboy ballgames. But it spread across the Anglophone world, and it is still embodied in the traditions of American high school and intercollegiate sports today.

Another distinctive feature of the public schools, relative both to modern education and to other nineteenth-century school systems, was student self-government. The Victorians thought that close supervision by schoolmasters would inculcate servile habits in boys, compromising what one headmaster

called 'the great glory of an English public school – its free development of character, its social expansiveness, in short its liberty'. As a result, a system of prefects was developed in which, in theory, the more benevolent and mature boys were given extensive pastoral and disciplinary responsibilities over the others. The prefects would receive an apprenticeship in leadership, while the student body as a whole would come to see authority as something emanating from their peers rather than imposed upon them by an alien entity.

It is not hard to imagine how a self-governing oligarchy of teenage boys might go wrong. Victorian educationalists were themselves concerned about the potential for abuse, and various checks and balances were developed, like jury systems and rights of appeal before punishment. It is hard to say how often the prefect system operated unjustly, reliant as we are on the impressionistic evidence of personal memoirs, but it is beyond doubt that it was sometimes brutal. It is important to understand, however, that it was intended not simply as a system of domination, but almost as one of 'elite liberalism', whereby students would not only be subjects of authority, but also to some extent its legislators and executors.

University

From school, most elite Victorian men went

on to Oxford or Cambridge ('Oxbridge'). Oxbridge was not necessarily a big step up academically. Virtually everyone who applied was accepted. Once you were in, you could pursue one of two tracks: either an 'honors' degree, which involved at least some serious study, or a 'pass' or 'ordinary' degree, which involved sitting only some very easy exams in classics and religion. In the early Victorian period, most Oxbridge students were 'pass men'; this changed gradually as the century drew on, but there were still plenty of pass men around as late as 1914. The pass degree was particularly popular among aristocratic students, who tended to prioritize rowing, feasting, and social polish over disciplined study.



Oxford in the early twentieth century. Victorian Oxford was about a mile across, and the colleges were all within a short walk of each other. As at many times in their lives, the Victorian elite chose to congregate geographically.

IMAGE
David Rumsey Map Collection, Stanford University Libraries.

Many honors students took their studies more seriously. But even they were not very practical in orientation. Oxbridge tutors believed overwhelmingly that the purpose of an undergraduate degree was neither training for work nor even preparation for academic research, but rather a general moral and intellectual formation that would fit students for any professional role they might later pursue. 'No man will be a first-rate physician or engineer who is not something more than either, who has not some taste for art, some feeling for literature, or some other interest external to his profession', said Benjamin Jowett, the influential master of Balliol College. Jowett aimed to convey this 'something more' to his undergraduates, leaving them to acquire specific technical knowledge later.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, such theories led the universities to exclude almost everything except classics and (at Cambridge) mathematics from the curriculum. Natural and applied sciences were viewed with suspicion on the basis that they were, in the words of the famous Oxford professor Edward Bouverie Pusey, 'confined to the reception of information on matters of fact' and do not involve 'continued reasoning'. Between 1855 and 1860, just 8.1 percent of honors degrees were awarded to science students; in 1910–1914, it was still only 13.7 percent.

Nearly all students lived together in colleges. This contrasted with the situation in continental Europe, where students generally rented rooms off campus. Victorian pedagogues believed that colleges provided religious, cultural, and social formation, and that they prevented English students from acquiring the bad morals and habits of their continental peers. A typical day began with chapel; honors students and the less indolent pass men would then spend the morning reading and preparing assignments. Students normally ordered lunch to their rooms: rich students could have elaborate feasts brought up from the college kitchens, like Sebastian Flyte's lunch in *Brideshead Revisited*. In the early afternoon it was customary to go out for rural walks or sports, especially rowing and cricket.



The Prince of Wales, the future Edward VIII, at a meal with friends in Magdalen College, Oxford. Students could order lavish meals to their rooms from college kitchens. with the

IMAGE Magdalen College Archives.

cost added to their termly bill. Notice the cheap and mismatched furniture – this was still student accommodation, however grand its residents.

Around 4pm, students returned to college. Once or twice a week this was the time for 'tutorials', one-to-one or small-group discussions with tutors, often over tea or sherry. The tutorial system contrasted sharply with the more didactic and lecture-based teaching that prevailed in other university systems, and was seen as a way of inculcating independent thought. If a student had no tutorials, he would probably spend the early evening reading, socializing, or at one of the university's various cultural, discussion, or debating societies, notably the Oxford and Cambridge Unions. The day concluded with a formal dinner in the college hall, often followed by conversation over dessert, digestifs and tobacco in college rooms.

Although the tutorial system was seen with pride, the quality of tutoring was decidedly uneven. Until the 1870s, most fellowships were open only to Anglican priests. Fellowships were comfortable positions, but much less comfortable than well-paid positions in the Church of England, especially since fellows were generally not allowed to marry. The typical Oxbridge don of the mid-nineteenth century was thus in his early or mid-twenties and regarded his fellowship as a holding post, which he would leave as soon as a desirable parish became available. Many of these young men would have been very

bright, but few were serious researchers or experienced teachers. Fellowships were opened up to laymen in the later decades of the century, but Oxford and Cambridge did not become world-leading research institutions until they were transformed by German scholars fleeing Nazism in the 1930s.

The dominance of Oxbridge in British culture was unusual: these institutions educated a much larger share of the elite than was the case for any two institutions in any other country, with the possible exception of the top *grandes écoles* in France. Nonetheless, some elite and quasi-elite Victorian groups followed alternative educational pathways. For example, for much of the nineteenth century the colonial civil service in India was educated at a training college called Haileybury. These programs were not, however, necessarily more rigorous than the usual Oxbridge track. I cannot improve upon David Gilmour's description of a day in the life at Haileybury, distilled from the memoirs of the civil servant John Beames:

> *At eight in the morning, the students rushed to chapel, many of them wearing only a nightshirt under a gown or overcoat. Afterwards they returned to their rooms for breakfast, which often turned into parties with 'tankards of beer or claret'. Breakfast was followed by smoking a pipe and dealing with tailors and other tradesmen who had arrived from Hertford. At ten o'clock the bell rang for lectures, which*

> *lasted two hours on some days, three on others. The studious minority known as the 'steadies' took notes; the others yawned, drew sketches of their teachers and fooled about. After a lunch of bread, cheese and beer, they were free to do what they liked. The oarsmen went to the river, the cricketers went to their cricket pitch, the 'steadies' went for a 'solemn constitutional' along the lanes, and the 'fast men' either slipped off by train to London or else clattered off in dog-carts to play billiards at Hertford or Ware. Dinner took place in Hall at six followed by evening chapel at eight. Then the 'steadies' retired to their rooms and read far into the night, most of the others sat about drinking and singing, and at about two in the morning the 'fast men' returned very drunk from Broxbourne Station after catching the last train from Shoreditch.*

Beames's account was particularly colorful, but nobody seems to have had a good word to say about Haileybury as a teaching institution. Everyone, however, including Beames, agreed that it engendered much *esprit de corps* among its graduates. The future prime minister Lord Salisbury commented on the 'close friendships formed there, which softened the rivalries of after life and secured devoted instead of perfunctory co-operation'. Perhaps something similar might be said for much of the elite Victorian education system.

Adulthood

One virtue that upper-class Victorian education signally failed to inculcate was early rising. Although Victorian schoolboys and university students got up fairly early for chapel, the day of an upper-class Victorian adult started late. The great prime minister of the early nineteenth century, Pitt the Younger, breakfasted at 9am. The great prime minister of the Victorian period, William Gladstone, hosted a social breakfast starting at 10.30am (claret was served), continuing till about noon. His rival Benjamin Disraeli attended breakfasts hosted by Lord Houghton, which started at 10am, but which Disraeli would join at about 11.30am. Elite Victorians generally had flexible working hours and were free to work from home unless they had meetings elsewhere. Many spent the whole morning at home, reading the newspaper, answering letters, and preparing for later meetings. The Edwardian prime minister Arthur Balfour generally did all this literally in bed, rarely emerging from his bedroom before lunchtime. As we shall see, mornings must often have been even later from February to July, when many leading Victorians would have spent much of the night partying.

At some point in the late morning, the Victorian would finally make his way to the office. By the end of the century, some wealthy people lived in suburbs and commuted by railway, especially in industrial

cities like Birmingham and Manchester. In general, however, Britain's elites were slow to suburbanize, and in 1914 most still lived in centrally located row houses and walked to work. Every day a great herd of frock-coated men emerged from Belgravia and Mayfair and poured through Covent Garden to their offices in Parliament, Whitehall, the Inns of Court, and the City.

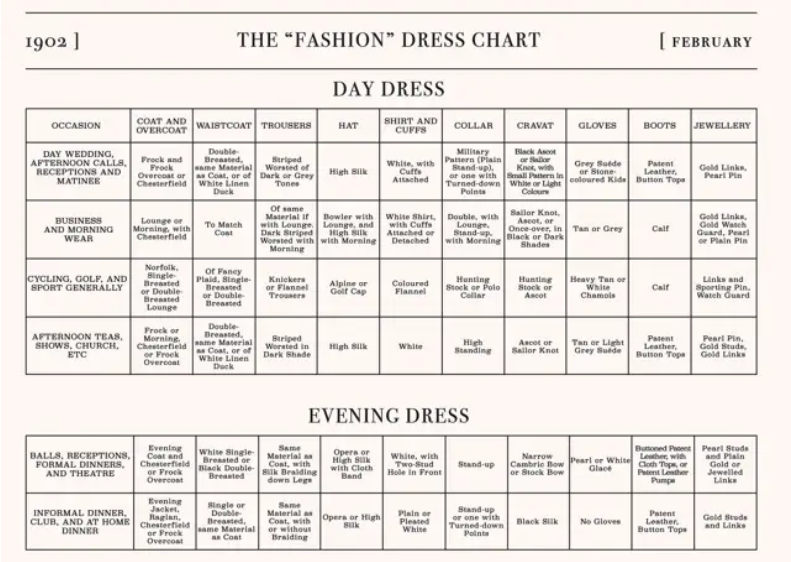


The Strand in London around 1895. The Strand is one of the main roads between the residential West End and the commercial City, so it is thronged with top-hatted men commuting by foot or by horse bus.

IMAGE
Alamy.

The exact timetable for the middle of the day varied by period and profession. In the early Victorian period, the upper classes often went without a serious lunch but dined early at 5 or 6pm. This changed drastically in the third quarter of the century, perhaps because of improved artificial lighting, so that by the

1870s many Victorians had a substantial lunch with wine, usually with professional peers at a club, sustaining them until dinner at about 8.30pm. Politics was a part-time job for most members of Parliament (MPs) and peers, so Parliament typically did not start sitting until 4.30 or 5pm; the majority of part-time politicians could wind up a gentlemanly day at the office in time for this, while the minority of full-time politicians could spend the day on party management, or (if they were ministers) at government business in their ministries.



1902] THE "FASHION" DRESS CHART [FEBRUARY

DAY DRESS

OCCASION	COAT AND OVERCOAT	WAISTCOAT	TROUSERS	HAT	SHIRT AND CUFFS	COLLAR	CRAVAT	GLOVES	BOOTS	JEWELLERY
DAY WEDDING, AFTERNOON CALLS, RECEPTIONS AND MATINEE	Frock and Frock Overcoat or Chesterfield	Double-Breasted, same Material as Coat, or of White Linen Duck	Striped Worsted of Dark or Grey Tones	High Silk	White, with Cuffs Attached	Military Pattern (Plain Stand-up), or one with Turned-down Points	Black Ascot or Sailor Knot, with Small Pattern in White or Light Colours	Grey Suède or Stone-coloured Kids	Patent Leather, Button Tops	Gold Links, Pearl Pin
BUSINESS AND MORNING WEAR	Lounge or Morning, with Chesterfield	To Match Coat	Of same Material if with Lounge, Dark Striped Worsted with Morning	Bowler with Lounge, and High Silk with Morning	White Shirt, with Cuffs Attached or Detached	Double, with Lounge, Stand-up, with Morning	Sailor Knot, Ascot, or Once-over, in Black or Dark Shades	Tan or Grey	Calf	Gold Links, Gold Watch Guard, Pearl or Plain Pin
CYCLING, GOLF, AND SPORT GENERALLY	Norfolk, Single-Breasted or Double-Breasted Lounge	Of Fancy Plaid, Single-Breasted or Double-Breasted	Knickers or Flannel Trousers	Alpine or Golf Cap	Coloured Flannel	Hunting Stock or Polo Collar	Hunting Stock or Ascot	Heavy Tan or White Chamois	Calf	Links and Sporting Pin, Watch Guard
AFTERNOON TEAS, SHOWS, CHURCH, ETC	Frock or Morning, Chesterfield or Frock Overcoat	Double-Breasted, same Material as Coat, or of White Linen Duck	Striped Worsted in Dark Shade	High Silk	White	High Standing	Ascot or Sailor Knot	Tan or Light Grey Suède	Patent Leather, Button Tops	Pearl Pin, Gold Studs, Gold Links

EVENING DRESS

BALLS, RECEPTIONS, FORMAL DINNERS, AND THEATRE	Evening Coat and Chesterfield or Frock Overcoat	White Single-Breasted or Black Double-Breasted	Same Material as Coat, with Silk Braiding down Legs	Opera or High Silk with Cloth Band	White, with Two-Stud Hole in Front	Stand-up	Narrow Cambric Bow or Stock Bow	Pearl or White Glacé	Buttoned Patent Leather, with Cloth Tops, or Patent Leather Pumps	Pearl Studs and Plain Gold or Jewelled Links
INFORMAL DINNER, CLUB, AND AT HOME DINNER	Evening Jacket, Raglan, Chesterfield or Frock Overcoat	Single or Double-Breasted, same Material as Coat	Same Material as Coat, with or without Braiding	Opera or High Silk	Plain or Pleated White	Stand-up or one with Turned-down Points	Black Silk	No Gloves	Patent Leather, Button Tops	Gold Studs and Links

Victorians loved dressing up, and both men's and women's clothes were much more elaborate than they are today.

IMAGE Wikimedia Commons (adapted).

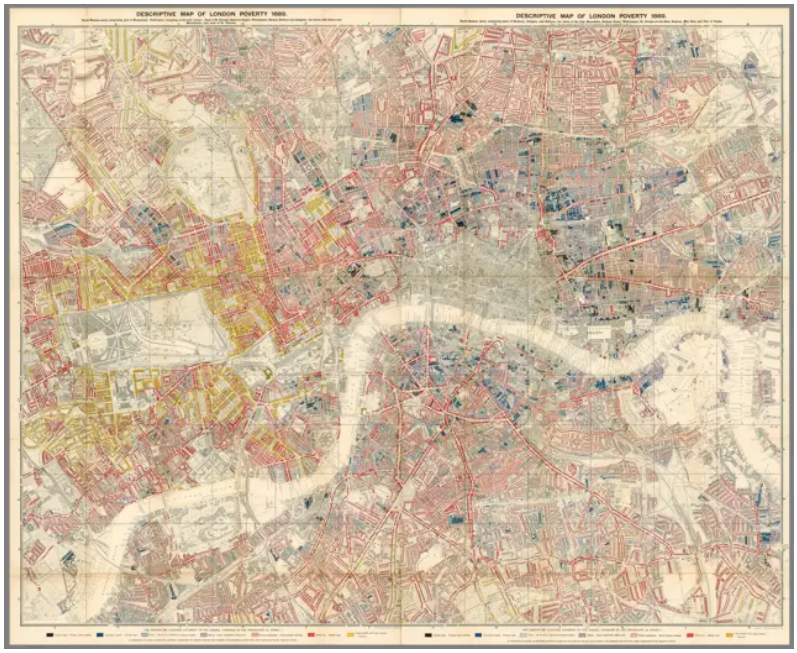
Provided Parliament did not interfere, however, an elite Victorian would stroll home to dress for dinner. Upper-class Victorians of both sexes paid great attention to their clothes. For an informal dinner at home, a man would change into evening dress, usually including a starched collar, cuff and shirt

including a starched collar, cuff and shirt front, patent leather shoes, and gold shirt studs and cufflinks.

Dinners were rich and elaborate. The number of courses naturally varied, but it was invariably more than a modern dinner at an equivalent grade of formality. A typical dinner began with soup and sherry, then proceeded to fish with hock (Rhineland whites), passing on through a sequence of meat courses with champagne or red wines, and finishing with various desserts and savories served with port and madeira. The Victorians loved drinking and drank a lot by modern standards. Men drank more than women, but women drank a good deal too: one conduct guide noted that 'young ladies seldom drink more than three glasses of wine at dinner but married ladies, professional ladies, and those accustomed to society, and habits of affluence, will habitually take five or even six, whether in their own homes or at the tables of their friends'.

For about five months a year, between February and July, the elite of Victorian Britain congregated in London for what was called 'the Season', essentially a sequence of parties and social events. They usually owned or rented houses in Mayfair and Belgravia, two small neighborhoods that face each other across Hyde Park, meaning that the bulk of the ruling class would live literally within walking distance of one another. Parallel institutions existed in most Western countries at the time – the social seasons in

countries at the time – the social seasons in Paris, Vienna, St Petersburg and New York were famous – but the London Season had a particularly dominant role in the national life because it coincided with the Parliamentary session, making it a forum for political networking as well as elite matchmaking and court rituals.



London's residential neighborhoods in 1889, graded by social class. The wealthy neighborhoods are in yellow, clustered around the royal parks in inner west London. There was an internal hierarchy even among these, with Belgravia and Mayfair at the top of the hierarchy. Most of Britain's elites lived in London for at least part of the year, during which time they would have been within half an hour's walk of each other.

IMAGE
David Rumsey Map Collection, Stanford University Libraries.

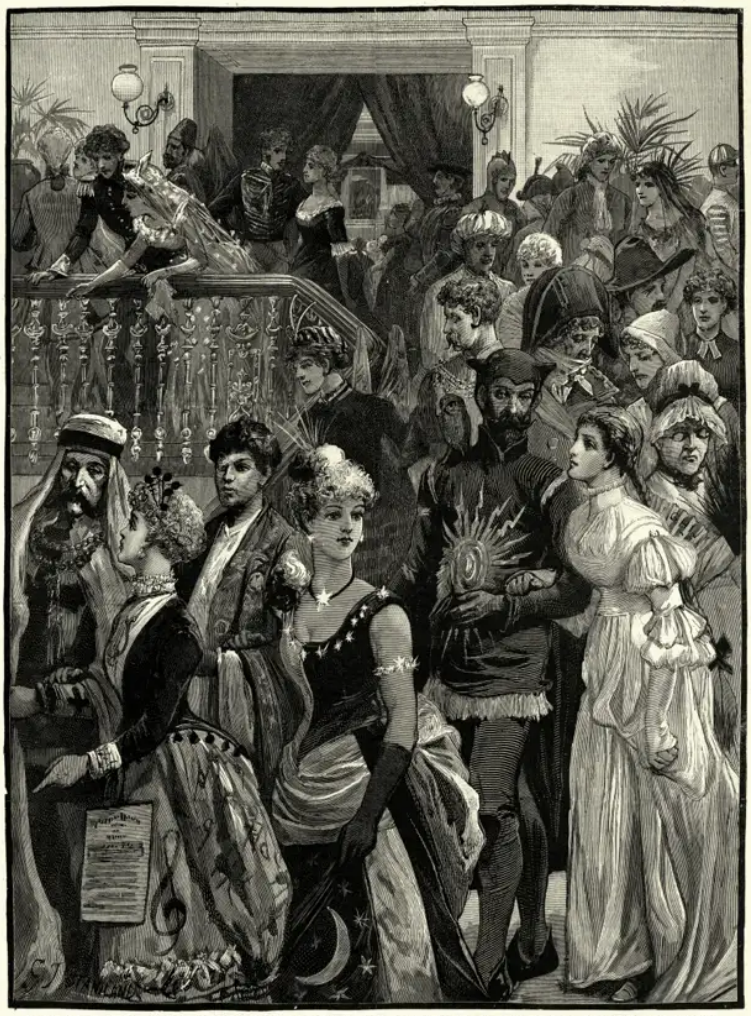
During the Season, the upper-class evening continued long beyond dinner. Balls were the flagship evening entertainment. They started late, at nine or ten, and guests would filter in

gradually, with the dance floor really full from about 11pm. Around midnight a meal called 'supper' appeared, comprising soups, salads, cold meats, shellfish, fruit, and ice cream. The beverage most associated with balls was 'negus', a hot drink made of port, spices, sugar and oranges or lemons. Lemonade, tea and coffee were on hand throughout the evening, and champagne, hock, port and sherry were served at supper. In addition, an 1867 guide for aspiring ball hosts observed, 'Bottled pale ale and stout are quite permissible – in fact, they have become indispensable'.

After supper, dancing recommenced; a good ball peaked after 1am. Guests gradually returned home in the small hours, and the most determined might continue until dawn. It was good form to slip out quietly, and there was no requirement even to say goodbye to the hostess. 'The great thing is to avoid making your departure felt as a suggestion for breaking up the party, as you have no right to hint by your movements that you consider the entertainment has been kept up long enough', an etiquette guide notes.

Balls naturally had special significance for people in the marriage market. Arranged marriage in the strict sense had largely died out by the nineteenth century, but upper-class young people and their parents still hoped they would make advantageous matches, and balls furnished opportunities to do so. It would be quite wrong, however, to think that balls were simply mass dating events

balls were simply mass dating events. Courtiers, bankers, judges, and cabinet ministers would have shared the dance floor with debutantes. In fact, with some exceptions like club lunches, the social events of the Victorian elite were notable for their lack of segregation by age or sex. A Society ball discharged the functions of both a teenage house party and a business networking convention: in fact, it *was* both a teenage house party and a business networking convention.



FANCY DRESS BALL AT THE PRINCE'S HALL, PICCADILLY, FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE CHELSEA HOSPITAL FOR WOMEN—COMING DOWN FROM SUPPER

The Victorians loved dressing up: fancy dress balls were a

IMAGE iStock

up. Fancy dress balls were a popular variant on the normal format.

iStock.

Unmarried young people (and their unfortunate parents) might go to three or four balls per week, while other Society members would go to one or two. But the other nights were scarcely less busy. Opera, theatre and concerts were important, especially opening or gala nights. The bread and butter of the Season was soirées, card parties, *conversazione*, receptions and less formal dances, as well as midnight 'supper parties', all mostly hosted in private homes. These elements were modular. An MP might miss dinner for a late sitting of Parliament, but still drop into a soirée at 10.30pm, turn up to a supper party at 11.45pm, and then arrive at a ball at 1am. From February to July, the Victorian upper class led a remarkably nocturnal existence, with bedtimes in the small hours and the mornings something of a write-off.

By one definition, then, elite Victorians did remarkably little work: they could easily spend just four or five hours a day actually in the office. But by another definition, they were working all the time. Lunches, balls, and dinners were certainly fun, but they were not *just* fun. In the words of the historian Leonore Davidoff, these social occasions provided 'access to a vast information network: information about jobs, investment possibilities, secret political decisions'. Many Victorians were intensely ambitious and

drove themselves hard: sleep deprivation, exhaustion and burnout were familiar companions. The distinctive feature of elite Victorian lifestyles was not laziness, but an extreme weighting toward what we might call team building and professional networking, and the near-total fusion of personal and professional life.

Method in their madness?

The sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies famously distinguished *Gemeinschaft* – community, held together by ties of sentiment and tradition – from *Gesellschaft* – society, held together by explicit laws and contracts. As societies grow more complex, he thought, *Gesellschaft* tends to replace *Gemeinschaft*. But the Victorian elite was a little *Gemeinschaft* at the apex of an enormous *Gesellschaft*, an intimate community bound together by ties of common culture, shared memory, intense status competition, loyalty, and love. Its members strove for one another's envy, esteem and gratitude, and to achieve this they would go far beyond what was contractually obligated or financially advantageous. It is not altogether fanciful to think of the Victorian elite as functioning like a big premodern village, though its members were geographically dispersed across the kingdom and its vast empire.

All the practices I have described in this article helped to maintain this emotional village. The ruling class were educated

village. The ruling class were educated together from an early age, in schools and universities designed to inculcate shared values, a common identity, and ties of mutual loyalty. As adults they congregated every year in an area of central London that actually was village-sized, where they spent every night in one another's company. Young members of the Victorian elite tended to meet their future spouses during these glittering evenings, so that the elite came to form, to some extent, a literal family.

Maintaining this community required a lot of time and effort, which obviously had opportunity costs. All else being equal, rich and powerful Victorians must have been less productive for spending four hours a day in the office rather than twelve. But the creation of a single ruling *Gemeinschaft* may have had compensatory advantages.

One of these was unity. In some ways, rich Victorians were quite diverse. They came from every part of the British Isles. They included landed aristocrats and urban bourgeois, with the latter steadily superseding the former over the course of the century. Most landowners were Anglicans, but many of the new rich were Nonconformists (non-Anglican Protestants), and some were Jews or Catholics. With the conspicuous exception of the Irish Catholics, all these people were successfully folded into a single British elite, rather than forming hostile counter-elites working to overthrow the social order.

This obviously had advantages for Britain. The elites of the American South had a very different identity to those of the North, and ultimately led the country into civil war. Spain, Italy and France suffered from incessant conflicts between urban bourgeois and rural nobility. Germany was riven with strife along geographical, religious, and class lines. Some of these tensions existed in Britain, but except in Ireland, the elite finessed them peacefully. A Nonconformist Manchester businessman probably supported the Liberal Party rather than the Conservatives, but the idea of violently seceding from Britain to form a Methodist Republic of the North would never have occurred to him.

Maybe the Victorian elites also had advantages relative to elites today. One strength of all *Gemeinschaften* is that they can reward their members with prestige rather than money, which is useful in contexts where adequate financial rewards are for some reason impossible.

This might be an important advantage sometimes. For political reasons, most modern societies pay politicians and civil servants vastly less than they pay people with a similar level of responsibility in the private sector. As a result, they struggle to persuade their most talented people to enter and remain in public life. The Victorians did not have this problem. Until the 1880s, most local government roles in Britain were conducted

on a completely unpaid basis by local landowners. They also administered the rudimentary welfare system, sat as magistrates in the lower courts, and staffed the boards of most schools and hospitals. A landowner who ignored these responsibilities would suffer no material consequences, but he would be diminished and resented in the eyes of his peers, and for most, that was inducement enough.

Something similar applied to Parliament. Nineteenth-century MPs were unpaid and covered most of their own election expenses. In the 1880 General Election, the average Parliamentary candidate bore about £150,000 of expenses in an urban constituency and £450,000 in a rural one (in today's money). MPs had to take this massive financial hit repeatedly, every time there was an election. They also had to bear all of their costs upon assuming office, including staff, travel, and accommodation in both Westminster and their constituency. And yet there was no difficulty filling Parliament: many of the richest and most powerful people in England competed fiercely to enter, simply because being an MP was intensely prestigious in their social milieu.

Maybe this identification with the social system affected how politicians behaved in office, too. In *The English Constitution* the political writer Walter Bagehot noted that parliamentary democracy creates powerful incentives for opposition parties to damage

the country by corrosively undermining the government when it makes difficult but necessary decisions. But in practice, he thought, English politicians did not do this as much as one might expect:

> *In abstract theory these defects in our present practice would seem exceedingly great, but in practice they are not so. English statesmen and English parties have really a great patriotism; they can rarely be persuaded even by their passions or their interest to do anything contrary to the real interest of England, or anything which would lower England in the eyes of foreign nations. And they would seriously hurt themselves if they did.*

It is hard to know how seriously to take claims like this. But it is certainly true that the MPs of both parties overwhelmingly belonged to the community described in this essay, sharing friends, relatives, memories, and values. Perhaps the elite village could punish them for defecting from norms in ways that are impossible today, making political life less prone to divisiveness, demagoguery, and brinkmanship.

Would modern societies work better if their local and national government were conducted by a tight-knit community of extremely rich and successful people? Maybe not: the downsides are obvious. But the problems would be interestingly different from those that they have in reality. Imagine a

San Francisco whose Board of Supervisors featured Jeff Bezos, Larry Page, Sam Altman and Mark Zuckerberg, each feeling this responsibility to be the greatest glory of his career, each hoping that he might one day attain the greater glory that is the House of Representatives. It might not be paradise. Maybe it would be a disaster. But it would certainly be interesting.



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