

BLACK COUNTRY LIVING MUSEUM

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Adventures Through Time is an exciting new series of animations and podcasts, working in collaboration with Fun Kids Radio UK. Below is the transcript of the first podcast episode.

Podcast – Episode 2: Queen Victoria visits the Black Country

Voice over/intro jingle: The Black Country Living Museum Podcast, Powerful Women of the Black Country

Host: Hello and welcome to the Black Country Living Museum Podcast, the show where we dive into the history of the Black Country, discover the stories from the past and have some fun along the way!

Question: Who Was Queen Victoria and why was her visit important?

Host : Today we're going to talk about Queen Victoria. Queen Victoria was the second longest reigning monarch Britain has ever had. She was on the throne from June 20th 1837, until her death on the 22 January 1901, that's nearly 64 years! She was very popular among the people of Britain with many people having pictures of her in their houses. It might seem strange that I mention this but at the time photographs were a recent development and called daguerreotypes.

It may seem strange that we choose Queen Victoria as a topic for black Country history, but she did visit, twice during her reign. The first time was an interesting event. It happened when she was 13 years old and she passed through on a train. She was so offended by the sight of the Black Country she closed the curtains in her carriage as she passed through and wrote in her diary "the country is very desolate everywhere [...] the men, women (sic), children, country and houses are all black," and added, "but I cannot by any description give an idea of its strange and extraordinary appearance."

Her next appearance in The Black Country, happened years later in 1866. It was her first public appearance since the death of her husband Prince Albert in 1819.

She came to the black country because they had constructed a statue of Prince Albert (today know locally as *the man on the 'oss'*).

You can find out more about this in our Adventures Through Time Episode, but something which is not mentioned is the enormous amount of effort that went into showing off what The Black Country had to offer.

As the Queen processed from the railway station through the town, watched by huge crowds, she passed under six triumphal arches created for the ceremony. This was described in the London Illustrated News:

“the first (arch, consisted)... of coal and iron, denoting the staple products of the district which her Majesty had honoured. The coal had been procured from the Round Oak Works of the Early of Dudley and was a portion of the ten-yard seam for which Staffordshire is so famous. The arch was surrounded with trophies in the shape of miners’ pickaxes, whilst here and there was placed a lighted “Davy” lamp. A few yards further on was built a huge pillar of coal, over 40ft high, some of the blocks of which weighed over three tons. These two structures were composed of more than 100 tons of coal... Another arch was composed of hardware goods, and provided as it was with trays, vases, tinplate goods, iron tubes, coalscuttles, axes, and such like, aptly represented the staple industries of the town. “

You can see that the people of the Black Country went to an enormous amount of effort to make her feel welcome and as it says in our video, she was so pleased that she Knighted the Mayor on the spot.

Discussion Topic: Queen Victoria Discussion [5 minutes]

Host: Now, here to help us learn a bit more about Queen Victoria is our researcher Nadia.

Questions to guest:

Was the 13 year old Victoria’s opinion of the Black Country a common opinion outside of the Black Country? And what things contributed to this opinion?

I think Victoria’s opinion was shared by many; others have made similar comments. The US Consul to Birmingham, Elihu Burritt (who is credited with coining the term ‘the Black Country’) wrote in 1868: the area was “black by day, red by night”. Victorian novelist Charles Dickens once described the Black Country as a “cheerless region” in which “tall chimneys, crowding on each other and presenting that endless repetition of the same, dull, ugly form poured out their plague of smoke, obscured the light, and made foul the melancholy air.”

People from the Black Country also described it in such terms. Local poet William Shenstone wrote about the intensity of manufacturing in the Black Country and its effect on the landscape and its people.

I think a number of things contributed to this opinion. Firstly, it's quite simply what people experienced. They could hear the clang of the drop hammer, smell the air thick with smoke and see the flames of the forges and soot-covered buildings.

Secondly, for those from the middle and upper classes, they may not have been used to seeing poorer areas. In the case of Dickens, he came from a working class background, and used his position as a novelist to in part spread awareness about working and living conditions. So this may have motivated his descriptions of the Black Country. Someone like Victoria, at the age of 13, may have seen nothing like this before, and been quite shocked about it.

Do you think she really pulled the blinds down as she went through on the train? Was the Black Country really that bad?

This is an interesting question...

On the one hand, considering the fact that some people didn't hold the highest opinion of the Black Country, it seems quite likely that she did indeed pull the blinds down!

On the other hand, her diary entries are very descriptive and evocative. I think it sounds like she was captivated, as she looked onto these industrial scenes, perhaps unlike anything she had ever seen before or imagined even existed. She wrote that "it is like another world..." That, it was "dreadful", but also "strange and extraordinary". Don't you think it sounds like she was captivated?

It's also important to consider why she was taking the trip. It was part of an educational tour, organised by her mother, the Duchess of Kent (though the journey was against the wishes of her uncle, King William IV). Given it was an educational trip, I would like to think that the Duchess was encouraging the Princess to take everything in, even the most desolate of scenes.

Victoria seemingly valued going on such tours, as she continued to tour the country during her reign. If she was really that disgusted by what she saw, would she have continued touring the country, and as such does it make sense that she ever closed the blinds?

Finally, I encourage you to Google 'Queen Victoria pulled the blinds down'. What you will find that it is claimed that she pulled down the blinds in a number of places, from Bath to Newcastle, to Wolverhampton! I would perhaps put this down to a common myth, rather than something that definitely happened.

Did she really not go to any public events for five years after her husband's death?

She really didn't. The Queen had been in a long period of mourning. She actually remained in mourning until her own death. And there's a very specific reason why she chose the unveiling of the statue in Wolverhampton as the first public event to attend...

She was very moved by the efforts of Wolverhampton and its mayor. Queen Victoria was consulted on the statue of Prince Albert, it was she that requested that he be shown riding his favourite horse. She even visited the sculptor, Thomas Thornycroft, at his studio, to see how he was progressing. Members of the Wolverhampton Council went to London to invite the Queen to unveil the statue. It was assumed that she wouldn't accept - she'd already turned down similar offers from Manchester and Liverpool, and the unveiling was a mere nine days away – so rather short notice!

However, she accepted the invitation. I think she was influenced by the kindness the people of Wolverhampton had showed her. As I mentioned, Wolverhampton had involved her in the making of the Statue. Also, she had been deeply touched by a personal letter she had received from the widows of Wolverhampton. At the time, she had declared that if she ever attended another public function, it would be in Wolverhampton.

Black Country health and safety

Host: This is Black Country Health and Safety, where we have a look at some of the silliest injuries and mishaps from back in the black country's heyday.

Discussion Topic: Adventure's Through Time Episode

Host: Right, now we're going to have a listen to an episode of "Adventures through Time", our series all about 2 kids that visit the museum and get transported back in time to see the events they're learning about happen right in front of them!

[Play episode]

Listener questions

Host: Now it's time for the part of the show where we answer some of your questions. If you have a question for us then you can email us at blackcountrykids@bclm.com

Question: What is the strangest bit of clothing you have seen at the museum?

In Morrall's Menswear shop there is a swimming costume made of wool!

Question: What sort of things did people do for hobbies?

We have a pigeon loft belonging to a man called Charles Perslow who was a pigeon fancier(a person who looked after pigeons). Black Country pigeon lofts were well known for funky designs. Charles Perslow used his pigeons to help charity.

Outro [1 minute]

Host: Thanks for listening, if you want to find out more about The Black Country Museum then just head to our website at BCLM dot co dot uk.