

York Castle Museum

Christmas on Kirkgate Teachers' Exhibition Pack



Image: Kirkgate at Christmas. © Photo by Anthony Chappel-Ross, courtesy of York Museums Trust.

Chronology: The Victorians

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Section One: How to use this resource

This resource will help you get the most out of a visit to Kirkgate as part of our [A Victorian Christmas Cracker](#) workshop, or during a **self-guided visit** to York Castle Museum. It contains:

- An introduction to **Kirkgate**, **Victorian York**, and **Victorian Christmas traditions**.
- Information about seven **Kirkgate Highlights**, which you **may wish** to look at with your pupils when visiting.
- A **Kirkgate enquiry question** to share with your class **before** or **after** you have made your visit.

You can use this resource to familiarise yourself with Kirkgate **before your visit**. You may also find it helpful to **share** these notes with the other **adults** who will be accompanying the class on your visit to the museum.

Flash cards

A condensed version of these notes is available to borrow on the day of your visit. These come as a set of **flash cards**, which you can use to guide your pupils around Kirkgate.

Curriculum Links

A visit to Kirkgate as part of our **A Victorian Christmas Cracker** workshop, or during a **self-led visit** to York Castle Museum, can be used to cover the following curriculum areas:

Key Stage Two

Pupils should be taught about:

- A local history study
- A study or an aspect or theme in British history that extends pupils' chronological knowledge beyond 1066.

Section Two: Introduction to Victorian York

Kirkgate

- Kirkgate is one of the oldest recreated indoor streets of its kind in the world. It shows what life in York was like between **1870** and **1901**.
- The businesses on Kirkgate are named after **real shops** and **businesses** from late Victorian York.
- The street is named after the **founder** of York Castle Museum, **Dr John Lamplugh Kirk**.

Victorian York: Poverty and wealth

- York's centre was full of independent shops, like the well-to-do department store **Leak & Thorp (Kirkgate Highlight Five)** on 19 Coney Street. The shop had fancy window displays to encourage **middle-class customers** to purchase the latest fashionable goods.
- York's middle-class families lived in large homes. Their servants would place orders at expensive grocers such as **George Britton's (Kirkgate Highlight Four)**, where they purchased goods like spices, sugar, pepper, tea and coffee. These came to York from faraway places like the **Middle East** and **India**.
- The city's poorest inhabitants lived in crowded, unhealthy homes (**Kirkgate Highlight Two**). Water came from **shared pumps**, which were often built next to leaky **outdoor privies**. They planned and shopped for one meal at a time and would purchase their food from cheaper grocers such as **Thomas Amblers (Kirkgate Highlight Three)**.

Victorian York: Sweet success

- York was once known as **chocolate city**. The city was home to several confectionery manufacturers including **Rowntree's, Terry's, Craven's**, and the **York Confectionery Company**.
- Terry's and Rowntree's specialised in **chocolate**, whilst Craven's made **sugared almonds** and **sugar sweets**.
- Sweetshops in York, such as **G.E Barton's (Kirkgate Highlight Six)**, would have been busy with wealthy, **middle-class** customers. Chocolate was too **expensive** for poorer families to buy, though sugar sweets were **cheaper** and more affordable.

Christmas in the Victorian era

- Christmas Day became an official holiday in England in **1834**.
- The Victorians **changed** the idea of Christmas so that it became focused on the **family**. Preparing and eating food, decorating, and gift giving became activities for the whole family to enjoy. Charles Dicken's book **A Christmas Carol**, with its themes of family, charity and goodwill, helped to spread this idea of Christmas.

Christmas trees

- Christmas trees first came to England in the **18th century**. The tradition of putting up a tree in the home, however, didn't become popular until a **picture** was published in the **Illustrated London News** in **1848**. This showed **Queen Victoria** standing with her husband, **Prince Albert**, and their **children** around a Christmas tree.
- Trees were commonly decorated with **candles**, **glass baubles**, and **garlands**. Some **middle-class** families hung **presents** from their trees to show their generosity.
- Christmas trees didn't become popular with **poorer** families until the **1950s**. Instead, they decorated their homes with **plants**, such as **holly** and **ivy**, which could be gathered for free.

Christmas shopping

- By the **1870s** Christmas shopping had become very popular. All shops and traders, whether grocers or drapers, would transform their windows with fancy **Christmas displays**. **The Lady's Pictorial** – a weekly magazine – described some of the displays that could be seen at this time:

'Christmas cards in almost every window, in the companionship of the attractions of the toy-seller, the wares of the draper, the irresistible temptations of the milliner, and of their more legitimate comrades in the showcases of the stationer – from everywhere have these pretty little tokens of good-will and kindly thoughts been peering-out and seeking the attention of the passer-by'.

- By **1895** shops were remaining open until **late** on Christmas Eve. This was partly to allow for the purchase of last-minute presents, but also because – before the introduction of **fridges** – families were unable to **preserve food** for long periods of time.

Food

- Food was an important part of a Victorian Christmas. **Turkey** was popular with the **middle-classes** from the 1860s, whilst **goose** was eaten by the very **rich**. Those **less well off** in Victorian society might have eaten **beef**.

Section Three: Kirkgate Highlights

The **Kirkgate Highlights** listed below have been chosen because they can provide us with an insight into life in Victorian York and Victorian Christmas traditions.

Each Kirkgate Highlight comes with:

- A brief **description** of one of the key shops, businesses, or homes of Kirkgate, and how it relates to Christmas in the Victorian era.
- Suggested **enquiry questions** which you can use to lead a **discussion** with your pupils. Some of these are designed to be shared with pupils **before** the description.

Flash cards

A condensed version of these notes is available to borrow on the day of your visit. These come as a set of **flash cards**, which you can use to guide your pupils around Kirkgate.



Kirkgate Highlight One: The Cocoa Rooms

What is it?

- Cocoa Rooms were run by people with links to the **Quaker** or **Methodist churches**. They were an alternative to pubs, where people could have fun whilst drinking **cocoa** instead of **alcohol**.
- The Quakers and Methodists in York supported the **York Temperance Society**. Members of the society disliked people drinking too much alcohol.

Christmas link

- Quakers and Methodists often organised **events** in Cocoa Rooms at Christmas, such as **lectures** about the benefits of giving up alcohol.
- The Victorians saw Christmas as a time for **charity**. A **Christmas tree event** is being run in the Kirkgate Cocoa Rooms. People have been invited to **donate gifts** for the less fortunate. These have been wrapped in brown paper, ready to be given to the poor.

Enquiry questions

- What can you **smell** when you enter the Cocoa Rooms? Does this give you a clue about what people did here?
- What can you **see** in the trunk next to the Christmas tree? Who do you think they will be given to?



Image: The Cocoa Rooms on Kirkgate. Courtesy of York Museums Trust.

Kirkgate Highlight Two: A poor family's home

What is it?

- The **poor** of York lived in **crowded** and **unhealthy** housing, where water came from **shared pumps** that were often built next to leaky **outdoor privies**.
- In 1899 **Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree**, son of the chocolate factory owner **Joseph Rowntree**, commissioned a **survey** about the city's poorest areas. The results of this survey give us lots of information about what life was like for York's poorest residents.

Enquiry questions

- What **words** would you use to **describe** this family home?
- What have this family used to **decorate** their home?
Why do you think they have used these materials?

Christmas link

- Many poor families marked Christmas with a **special meal** and a **day off work**. This family have **decorated** their home with **greenery** gathered from outside. York was small enough for people to walk into the countryside and gather seasonal plants, such as **holly** and **ivy**, for free.
- The custom of hanging up a **stocking** began in the Victorian period. Children in poor families were unlikely to receive gifts from a toy shop. Instead, their stockings might contain an **apple**, an **orange**, and some **nuts**, or a cheap **wooden toy** like a doll.



Kirkgate Highlight Three: Thomas Ambler, Grocer

What is it?

- York's **poorer** families went to places like Ambler's Grocers to buy **food** and other necessities.
- Grocery shopping was done by the **women** in the family. They often went to the grocers every day as, before the introduction of **fridges**, it was difficult to keep food fresh.
- One of the main items you could buy at Ambler's was **tea**. The Victorians thought that drinking tea showed you were **cultured** and **hard working**. The shop also sold **meat**, **dairy** products, **eggs**, **fruit**, and **vegetables**.

Christmas link

- A set of **Christmas tree candles** are on show in the window. Before the widespread use of **electricity**, people would fix **candles** to their Christmas trees. This was a **fire risk** in the home, and it wasn't until the **1930s** that Christmas candles were replaced with artificial **lights**.

Enquiry questions

- What sorts of products can you **see** for sale in Ambler's grocers?



Kirkgate Highlight Four: George Britton's, Grocer

What is it?

- Britton's was a grocer which provided goods for York's **richer** residents. The shop sold **teas, coffees, spices, crystallised fruit, truffles** and more.
- Grocers like Britton's were able to stock a **range** of products because of the expansion of the **railways** in the Victorian era. Goods could travel much **faster** by rail than by road or river.

Christmas link

- The outside of Britton's has been decorated with **replicas** of the types of **fruits** and **nuts** that wealthy people would have brought for Christmas.
- According to an **advert** in **Christmas 1844**, Britton's sold sultanas, candied lemon, orange and citron, figs, Jordan and Valencia almonds, Brazil nuts, and 'Huntley and Palmer's Famous Christmas Cakes and Biscuits'.

Enquiry questions

- What sorts of products can you **see** for sale in Britton's?
- Which grocer's, Ambler's or Britton's, do you **think** would have been visited by wealthy middle-class customers? Why?



Image: Britton's Grocers on Kirkgate. Courtesy of York Museums Trust.

Kirkgate Highlight Five: Leak & Thorp, Draper

What is it?

- Traditionally, a draper was a dealer in **cloth**. However, in the 19th century, many drapers' shops turned into **department stores**. Leak & Thorp was York's **first** department store.

Christmas link

- Every year, Leak & Thorp held a Christmas shopping event called the **Christmas Bazaar**, which ran from late November until the New Year. **Japanese lanterns, palm fronds** and **pampas grass** were advertised as part of the **1899** Christmas Bazaar, and these have been used to decorate the shop's windows.
- The baubles on display are all original. Baubles could be bought in designs which might seem surprising to us today, including **fruit, birds, bells** and **clocks**.

Enquiry questions

- Can you **find** the **baubles** that are on display in the shop? How are they **similar** or **different** to the decorations we might put on our Christmas trees today?
- What **items** have been used to **decorate** the shop window for Christmas? How are these **similar** or **different** to the ways in which shops decorate their windows for Christmas today?

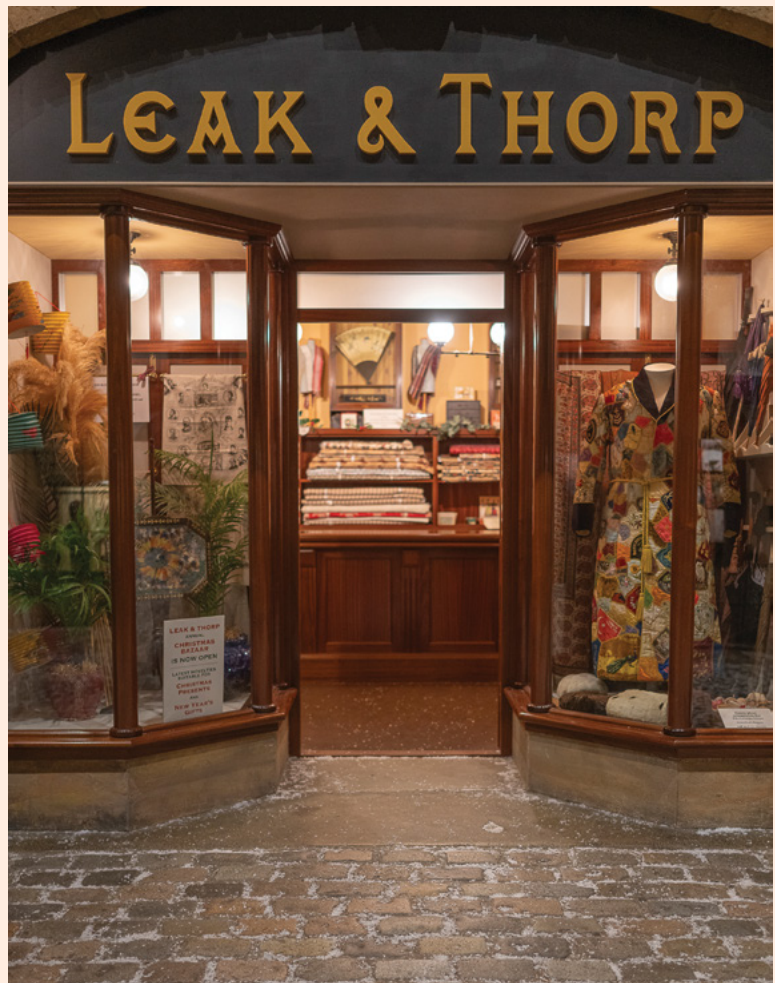


Image: Leak & Thorpe on Kirkgate. Courtesy of York Museums Trust.

Kirkgate Highlight Six: G.E Barton's, Confectioners

What is it?

- York's sweetshops would have been busy with **middle-class** customers. Chocolate was too **expensive** for most working-class families to afford, although **sugar sweets** were **cheaper** and more affordable.

Christmas link

- Sweets were a popular Christmas gift. They were used to **decorate Christmas trees** and were given in **Christmas crackers**.
- The Christmas cracker was inspired by **French bonbons**. In **1848**, British confectioner **Tom Smith** visited Paris and saw **sugared almonds** wrapped in twists of **paper**. He added the '**snap**' and thus created the cracker. The sweets were replaced by **small gifts** and **paper hats** later in the Victorian period.

Enquiry questions

- What sorts of **sweets** and **chocolates** are on sale in Barton's? Are they **similar** to those that you might enjoy today?



Kirkgate Highlight Seven: Kendrick's, Toy Shop

What is it?

- **Middle-class** families would have shopped at toy shops like Kendrick's. They wanted toys and games that could be played **indoors** on rainy days and would **teach** their children about subjects like **history** and **geography**.
- A list of toys sold at a bazaar by another York toy shop, **Cox and Falconer's**, in **1884** gives us an idea of the sorts of toys well-off families bought: dolls, ships, railways, balls, steam toys, games and puzzles.

Enquiry questions

- Do you **think** that everyone in Victorian York could afford to buy toys from a shop like Kendrick's?
- What are the **similarities** and **differences** between the toys in the shop window and the toys that children might play with today?

Christmas link

- The Victorians thought it was important for families to spend time together at Christmas. Families often purchased **parlour games** to play together on Christmas day.
- Poorer families, who couldn't afford toys from shops like Kendrick's, might go to street sellers who sold simple toys, such as **dolls**, **skipping ropes**, and **hobby horses**, for a penny or less.



Section Four: Kirkgate enquiry question

You may wish to share this **enquiry question** with your pupils to encourage them to **reflect** on what they have learned during their visit to Kirkgate.

What are the similarities and differences between Christmas in the Victorian era and Christmas today?

Answers might include:

- Many of the traditions which were popularised by the Victorians, such as Christmas trees, Christmas cards, and gift giving, are still practised now. Pupils might reflect that many of these were mostly practised by the wealthy middle-classes and were less widespread than they are today.
- The commercialisation of Christmas, with shops and businesses creating special window displays and adverts to encourage people to purchase gifts and foods.
- The importance of food. Pupils might reflect that certain things we take for granted today – such as eating turkey and chocolate – were only available to wealthy families.
- The importance of charity. Pupils could make comparisons between the Christmas Tree event being run in the Cocoa Rooms, and the Christmas campaigns that charities run today.

