

Smiling Victorians: why it's a myth that our ancestors didn't smile for pictures

Our image of the Victorians is shaped by the photographs we see in history books – stern, austere and relentlessly severe. Yet there was a playful side to our 19th-century ancestors, and Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones has the proof. Here he introduces a selection of portraits that show the sitters doing something entirely unexpected: smiling

March 30, 2020 at 2:46 pm

As a historian who's always searching for the text or the image that makes us re-evaluate the past, I've become preoccupied with looking for photographs that show our Victorian ancestors smiling (what better way to shatter the image of 19th-century prudery?). I've found quite a few, and – since I started posting them on Twitter – they have been causing quite a stir. People have been surprised to see evidence that Victorians had fun and could, and did, laugh. They are noting that the Victorians suddenly seem to become more human as the hundred-or-so years that separate us fade away through our common experience of laughter.

Of course, I need to concede that my collection of 'Smiling Victorians' makes up only a tiny percentage of the vast catalogue of photographic portraiture created between 1840 and 1900, the majority of which show sitters posing miserably and stiffly in front of painted backdrops, or staring absently into the middle distance. How do we explain this trend?

Why didn't many Victorians smile in photographs?

During the 1840s and 1850s, in the early days of photography, exposure times were notoriously long: the daguerreotype photographic method (producing an image on a silvered copper plate) could take several minutes to complete, resulting in blurred images as sitters shifted position or adjusted their limbs. The thought of holding a fixed grin as the camera performed its magical duties was too much to contemplate, and so a non-committal blank stare became the norm.

But exposure times were much quicker by the 1880s, and the introduction of the Box Brownie and other portable cameras meant that, though slow by today's digital standards, the exposure was *almost* instantaneous. Spontaneous smiles were relatively easy to capture by the 1890s, so we must look elsewhere for an explanation of why Victorians still hesitated to smile.

One explanation might be the loss of dignity displayed through a cheesy grin. "Nature gave us lips to conceal our teeth," ran one popular Victorian maxim, alluding to the fact that before the birth of proper dentistry, mouths were often in a shocking state of hygiene. A flashing set of healthy and clean, regular 'pearly whites' was a rare sight in Victorian society, the preserve of the super-rich (and even then, dental hygiene was not guaranteed).

A toothy grin (especially when there were gaps or blackened gnashers) lacked class: drunks, tramps, prostitutes and buffoonish music hall performers might gurn and grin with a smile as wide as Lewis Carroll's gum-exposing Cheshire Cat, but it was not a becoming look for properly bred persons. Even Mark Twain, a man who enjoyed a hearty laugh, said that when it came to photographic portraits there could be "nothing more damning than a silly, foolish smile fixed forever".

Part of the reticence towards the tooth-exposing photo lies in the fact that, during the 1830s and 1840s, the new mechanical art form of photography had grown out of the old, aristocratic tradition of the oil portrait, which sought to convey nobility and elegance. Now, the burgeoning middle classes and even the new celebrities of the age – such as 'Professional Beauties' (like Lily Langtry) and actors – attempted to mimic this aristocratic grandeur via the medium of photographic portraiture. Smiling was therefore unnecessary; laughing was taboo.

Yet this was also the age of comic greats – Dickens, Gilbert and Sullivan, Wilde and the musical hall stars Dan Leno and Vesta Tilley – and we know from the literature, songs, drama and graphic arts of the period that the Victorians loved to laugh. It was an essential component of good health. As the 1875 *Railway Book of Fun* proclaimed: cheerfulness was a "Christian duty" and a "proper means to maintain mental hilarity". The possession of a good sense of humour was an attractive quality and was much looked for in a romantic partner; newspaper 'Matrimonial Advertisements' often emphasised "jolly" and "fondness of fun" as key requisites in a young man or lady.

The "We are not amused" slogan has tarnished Queen Victoria and her age for long enough. It is time to reclaim Victorian laughter. After all, the queen herself had what we might call a 'cracking sense of humour', and laughed often, even in her final years. She had a "wonderful laugh" wrote Vicky of Prussia, "and grandmama often laughed till she was red in the face and even till she cried".

<https://www.historyextra.com/period/victorian/why-victorians-didnt-smile-pictures-myth-smiling-portraits/>