Britain was a rich and prosperous country but wealth was not equally divided between the rich and the poor. How were their lives different?

Did everyone live like the people in these pictures?

People have been painting and drawing the world around them for thousands of years, but the world's first photograph was taken in 1826 by a Frenchman called Joseph Niepce.

By the end of Queen Victoria's reign, photographs were quite common and their quality had improved. Photographs and paintings tell us a lot about how people lived in the past.
John Thomson was born in Edinburgh in 1837, the year of Queen Victoria's Coronation. In 1872 he settled in Brixton in London and from 1876 to 1877, he helped to produce a monthly magazine called 'Street Life in London'. The photographs that he took for the magazine showed what it was like for those who tried to make a living on the streets of London.

London Cabmen 1877 John Thomson

The lady in this photograph was known as ‘Old Scotty’. She was photographed sitting on the steps of a workhouse.

Scotty had been the wife of a wealthy man who had spent all his money before he died and left her with nothing. Apart from the clothes she wore, everything had been stolen.

She and had no option but to become one of London’s crawlers (beggars).

‘Old Scotty’ told John Thomson ....

I am becoming more accustomed to it now but what I cannot endure is the awful lazy, idle life that I am forced to lead. It is a thousand times worse than the hardest labour, and I would much rather my hands were cut, blistered and sore with working, than swollen and smarting from the sun, the rain and the cold with no hope of work.

What was life really like for the poor in Victorian times?

Covent Garden Flower Women by John Thomson

We arrive at the markets before dawn to get our flowers and stay at our post until late afternoon. In the summer we can do well but in bad weather we might get less than a shilling a week for all the hours we spent in the rain. Our life is a hard one as we have to support our husbands who have no work and our children who find whatever work they can.

What was life really like for the poor in Victorian times?