Can you imagine what it would have been like to be living on the streets in Victorian times?

What would it be like to be cold, hungry and all alone with no one to care or to help?

Who cared?

Thomas John Barnardo cared. He was born in Dublin in 1845. His father was a dealer in furs and the family were quite well off.

When he was fourteen years old, Thomas went to work in the office of a wine merchant. He soon gave up this job because, he said, selling drink led to the drunkenness that was all around the city at that time.

When he was sixteen, he made up his mind to become a medical missionary in China so, in 1866, he set off for London to study to be a doctor. His idea was that when he qualified as a doctor he'd go to China and help people there.

While he was studying medicine he became a preacher in the East End of London where the poor lived. He was appalled by what he found there.

Hundreds of thousands of people lived in the slums which were the dirtiest and most crowded parts of the city.

A Chinese Temple

Worst of all, thousands of children roamed the streets. They were the ones whose parents had died or couldn't afford to look after them. Many of these children slept in the gutters or in doorways and earned a living by begging or stealing.

Many of the streets were full of people who had no home, no job, and no hope for a better life.

Thomas Barnardo was appalled at the poverty he saw. He decided that he wouldn't go to China, instead he would stay in London and try to help the poorest children living on the streets.

In 1867, Thomas Barnardo set up a Ragged School in the East End of London so that poorest children could have a basic education.

Ragged schools were for those children who were too poor to pay for an education.
One evening, a boy called Jim Jarvis, took Thomas Barnardo around the East End of London to show him the children sleeping in doorways, on roofs and in the gutters. Thomas was so shocked that he vowed to help as many destitute children as he could.

He decided to open a home for boys. Many people thought that his idea was ridiculous.

One evening, eleven year old John Somers (who was nicknamed Carrots) was turned away from the home because it was full. Two days later Carrots was found dead. He'd died of hunger and cold.

From that day onwards Thomas Barnardo vowed that no child would ever be turned away from his orphanage again.

A sign was hung outside the home. It said, ‘No Destitute Child Ever Refused Admission’.

At that time the Victorians saw poverty as shameful. They believed that poor people were lazy and deserved what they got. Thomas Barnardo saw things very differently.

He believed that every child deserved the best possible start in life whatever their background, and he was determined to help them.

Dr Barnardo never forgot Carrots, the boy who had been turned out by his mother when he was just seven years old and who had lived on the streets with no one to look after him or love him. Dr Barnardo was determined that no child would ever have to sleep on the streets of London again.

Later Thomas Barnardo opened a home for girls called Girls’ Village Home. The girls were taught domestic skills in the hope that they could get jobs as servants but also, in the hope that they would be better able to look after themselves.

The first of Dr Barnardo’s homes was set up in 1870 and Dr Barnardo devoted the rest of his life to caring for destitute children.

Thomas Barnardo also believed that the best place for children was with a family so, he began a fostering scheme. Children were sent to respectable foster families in the country where they could be looked after by foster parents.

Thomas Barnardo was determined. In 1870 he opened his first home for boys. The boys he took in were trained in carpentry, metal work and shoemaking. He knew that boys who had these skills would have a good chance of finding work.
By the time Thomas Barnardo died in 1905, the charity that he’d founded to help destitute children had opened 96 homes which cared for 8,500 children.

Today Thomas Barnardo’s work still goes on. The Barnardo’s Charity works with and helps many families and young people.

Barnardo’s still believes that all children deserve the best chance in life and even today, continues to make a difference to their lives.