**Poverty**

The Victorians were very worried about crime rates, which were extremely high. Penalties included death, transportation and prison, often with hard labour, such as working the treadmill, breaking rocks or picking oakum. This is what Scrooge has in mind in Stave 1 when the charity collectors ask him to contribute. Of course, it is hard to separate crime from poverty and while people like Dickens saw that extreme poverty led to crime, others, like Scrooge, merely branded all the poor as criminals and treated them accordingly.

Being in debt was a criminal offence that also led to imprisonment, as Dickens knew from his own family. The family seen as debtors to the old miser in Stave 4 would no doubt have been sent to prison had he not died first. Poverty itself was seen as a crime, since the only relief offered was the workhouse – a grim institution that split up families and expected hard labour in return for miserable conditions. This was the only option offered by the Poor Law and it seems that many people preferred to die than go to a workhouse, which highlights how dreadful they were.

The Poor Law was created in England and Wales, amended in 1834, which meant that the rich no longer had to pay taxes in order to help the poor and those affected by poverty had to go into workhouses, which were little better than prisons.

Industrial Revolution:

From 1780, factory owners in Britain began to use coal-fired steam engines to power the machines in big factories. Many of these factories made cloth, which was sold all around the world. Before this, Britain used to be much more rural – farming was the most obvious way of making a living. This period – where most people in Britain went from working in farming to working in manufacturing – was known as the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution made many businessmen and factory owners extremely rich. It also created huge numbers of new jobs in the cities. However, the factory workers often lived in extreme poverty.

Poverty in Victorian England was caused by a rapid increase in the population: an influx of immigrants from Ireland fleeing the Potato Famine, which had left many of them starving; and the flight from the countryside, where there were fewer jobs, to the towns with their factories. The number of people meant that wages were at rock bottom and if the wage earner became unemployed, there were no savings to tide the family over. Between 1800 and 1900, London’s population grew from roughly 1 million people to 6 million. People were literally starving to death and children were often thrown out of a crowded home to make their own way on the streets. It is against this background that readers have to judge Bob Cratchit’s fear of being sacked. In 1848, there were an estimated 30,000 children roaming the London streets. These are the children personified by Dickens as Ignorance and Want at the end of Stave 3.

One of the worst consequences of the rapid expansion of towns was illness and disease. Without proper planning, houses were jammed in together, with inadequate sanitation and lacking clean water or fresh air. Whole families might live in a single room, which could be damp and unventilated. If they were lucky, the might share a toilet with the rest of the building. In London, especially, there were open sewers and the rubbish was tipped straight in to the Thames, while drinking water was drawn from the same stretch of river. It was hardly surprising that tuberculosis was endemic and there were frequent outbreaks of cholera. In the poorer areas of London, one child in five died before their fifth birthday. Such an area is described by Dickens in Stave 4.

Even in decent homes there was high child mortality, so for a poor clerk like Bob Cratchit the possibility of buying treatment for Tiny Tim was out of the question. There was no state provision for the sick, and doctors and hospitals charged fees for treatment and medicines. There were charitable foundations that gave help to the poor and sick, like those to whom Scrooge refuses a donation in Stave 1, but they could only provide relief for a few of all those who needed it.

The use of coal as the main fuel added to the health problems of a city where chimneys poured pollution into the sky. The smog described below was common in Victorian London and caused illnesses such as bronchitis and asthma.

Dickens believed that many of the problems in Victorian society – such as crime, poverty and disease – were caused by a lack of education. The poor in Victorian Britain had little or no education, and Dickens felt that education would help them to gain self-respect and improve their lives. Dickens supported several projects to educate the poor, such as the Ragged Schools, which offered free education, clothing and food to children from poor families – they were called ‘ragged’ after the ragged clothes the children wore.

**Class inequality**

In general, Victorian society was divided into classes – upper, middle and lower (or working) class – although there were many changes throughout the 19th Century. This class division was partly by wealth, partly by education and partly by occupation. The upper class consisted of landowners who were mainly the aristocracy and gentry, all of whom (the males at least) had attended public schools and then either Oxford or Cambridge University. They were the ruling class who filled seats in Parliament and held the top jobs in the judiciary, the Church and the armed forces. They were often, but not always, the wealthiest members of society.

The middle class was a wide spread, including professionals such as lawyers, doctors, the clergy and army officers, through factory and business owners and engineers, to bank managers, accountants and financiers like Scrooge. Many of the middle class were very wealth and some attended public schools or sent their sons to them.

The working class included those who worked as teachers, civil servants, shopkeepers, clerks like Bob Cratchit, and skilled and unskilled labourers. They were the largest class and the one with the least economic and political power.

Beneath these was an underclass of criminals, prostituted and slum dwellers, like that shown by Dickens in Stave 4.

The Industrial Revolution created a society in which the gap between the rich and poor was huge. Many of those struggling to survive in extreme poverty relied on the generosity of those better off than themselves. For example, some very successful philanthropist businessmen were keen to enhance the lives of their workers. The famous chocolate makers, the Cadburys, tried to provide quality homes and improve lifestyles for workers at their factory in Bournville, near Birmingham. However, many other wealthy people were only concerned with gaining more wealth – like Scrooge. Dickens attacked this kind of selfishness – he believed that wealthy people had a responsibility to help those less fortunate than themselves.

**Religion and Christmas**

Victorian society was very religious. Christianity had a strong influence on many areas of everyday life in Victorian Britain, particularly amongst the middle and upper classes. To be good Christians, people believed they should live by a strict moral code – attending church regularly, avoiding alcohol and exercising sexual restraint.

Dicken’s view of Christianity was different – he believed that to be a good Christian, people should seek out opportunities to do good deeds for other people. He thought that people should be humble, charitable, faithful and forgiving, rather than merely appearing religious.

It was a widespread Victorian practice to spend Sunday going to church and resting – this was known as Sabbatarianism. Dickens was opposed to this because it meant that working poorer people were denied any enjoyment on their one day off – everything was shut. Many poorer people didn’t have ovens at home, so they often had their food cooked by bakers. Sabbartarianism meant that many people couldn’t get a hot meal on Sundays because the bakers were shut.

At the start of the nineteenth century, Christmas was hardly celebrated at all. However, by the end of the century, it had become the most important celebration of the year. Many traditions that are associated with Christmas became increasingly important, such as cards, crackers, carols, decorations, gifts and Christmas dinner. Christmas celebrations were becoming more secular too, as feasts and games became a central part of the festivities. In the novella, both Fred and Fezziwig hot Christmas parties full of fun, dancing, laughter and food.

Although the medieval traditions of decorating the house with evergreens and bringing in the Yule log had always been practised, it was the Victorians who put the family at the centre of the Christmas celebration. This was partly because they wanted to be seen as a very moral, church-going society and thought the birth of Jesus should be central to the feast named after him. The custom of coming together as a family for a Christmas feast and a social event was important to the Victorians and this idea is central to A Christmas carol.

Christianity in various forms was practised by Victorian society as a while. The major religion was Church of England, which was undergoing an evangelical revival at the time. These reforms stemmed from the belief that practising good deeds was as important as being devout.

There was also a great interest in spiritualism in Dicken’s day, which he uses in the episode where Marley’s Ghost visits Scrooge. Dickens himself was cynical about it, exposing many mediums as frauds attempting to extract money from a gullible public.

**Workhouses**

The origins of the workhouse can be traced back to the Poor Law Act of 1388, which attempted to address the labour shortages following the Black Death in England by restricting the movement of labourers, and ultimately led to the state becoming responsible for the support of the poor. But mass unemployment following the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, the Industrial Revolution and a series of bad harvests meant that by the early 1830s the established system of poor relief was proving to be unsustainable. The New Poor Law of 1834 attempted to reverse the economic trend by discouraging the provision of relief to anyone who refused to enter a workhouse.

Life in a workhouse was intended to be harsh, to deter the able-bodied and to ensure that only the truly destitute would apply. As the 19th century wore on, workhouses increasingly became refused for the elderly, infirm and sick rather than the able-bodied poor.

People ended-up in the workhouse for a variety of reasons. Usually, it was because they were too poor, old or ill to support themselves. This may have resulted from such things as a lack of work during periods of high unemployment, or someone having no family willing or able to provide care for them when they became elderly of sick. Unmarried pregnant women were often disowned by their families and the workhouse was the only place they could go during and after the birth of their child. Prior to the establishment of public mental asylums in the mid-nineteenth century, the mentally ill and mentally handicapped poor were often consigned to the workhouse. Workhouses, though, were never prisons, and entry into them was generally a voluntary although often painful decision. It also carried with it a change in legal status – until 1918, receipt of poor relief meant a loss of the right to vote.

Workhouses varied enormously in size, with the smallest such as [Belford](http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Belford/) in Northumberland housing fifty inmates, while the largest such as [Liverpool](http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Liverpool/) could be home for several thousand. However, all workhouses were essentially a self-contained — and often largely self-supporting — community. Workhouses were also highly compartmentalised to separate the various classes of inmates, with the yards between the various buildings being divided up by eight-foot-high walls.

Once inside the workhouse, an inmate's only possessions were effectively their uniform and their dormitory bed. Beds were simply constructed with an wooden or iron frame, and could be as little as two feet across.

The inmates' toilet facilities were often a simple privy — a cess-pit with a simple cover having a hole in it on which to sit — shared perhaps by as many as 100 inmates. Dormitories were usually provided with chamber pots, or a communal 'tub'. After 1860, some workhouses experimented with earth closets — boxes containing dry soil which could afterwards be used as fertiliser. They were mostly used by rural workhouses where there was a ready supply of soil and there the spent soil could be usefully disposed of.

Once a week, the inmates were bathed (usually superintended — another assault on their dignity) and the men shaved.

**Social injustice**

Dicken’s novella is also an anti-Malthusian tale. Malthus was an early economist whose ideas became popular among businessmen who believed in accumulating material wealth and cared little for the welfare of others. In 1798, he wrote that human population would always grow faster than food supplies. This would mean that overpopulation would lead to many people, usually the poor, dying due to famine. For Malthus, poverty was the inevitable result of overpopulation because the worst-off in society would get less and less. Dickens shows his disgust with the Malthusian principle that population will always grow faster than food supply, and will be controlled through disease and starvation. He believed that there was plenty of food to go around – but only if the rich were more generous. He thought it was wrong that the poor should suffer because the rich were too selfish to share their wealth. Scrooge speaks to the charity collector using this principle: “If they would rather die,” said Scrooge, “they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population” (Stave 1) As a social commentator, Dickens saw the need for the reform of English society; he urged that the wealthy and privileged exhibit greater humanitarianism towards the poor and vulnerable.

In a letter to his friend Wilkie Collins, dated 6 September 1858, Dickens writes of the importance of social commitment:

“Everything that happens [...] shows beyond mistake that you can’t shut out the world; that you are in it, to be of it; that you get yourself into a false position the moment you try to sever yourself from it; that you must mingle with it, and make the best of it, and make the best of yourself into the bargain.”

Malthus and other popular economists believed that the existing poor laws in Britain were too charitable – they argued that poverty relief encouraged laziness and reduced the incentive to work hard and save money. In 1834, a new Poor Law was introduced to reduce the financial help available to the poor. It ruled that all unemployed people would have to enter a workhouse in order to receive food and shelter. However, these workhouses were extremely harsh places – inhabitants had to work hard and families were often split up. Many people lived in fear of being forced to enter a workhouse, where the conditions were made deliberately unpleasant to discourage the poor from relying on society to help them.

**Charles Dickens:**

* Charles Dickens was born in Hampshire on 7 February, 1812
* He had 7 brothers and sisters and was the 2nd to be born.
* His father, John, was a clerk in the navy pay office.
* In 1814 the family moved to London and then to Chatham, Kent.
* In 1824, John Dickens got into financial problems and was sent to a debtors’ prison, leaving his son to earn the money to pay his way out.
* Charles, then 12, went to work in a blacking factory, an experience that was to make a deep impression on him.
* He also had a formal education, going to school from 1824-1827, when he left to become a law office clerk.
* At 16, Dickens became a reporter for a parliamentary newspaper, which honed his writing skills and gave him some idea of the workings of government and law.
* In 1837, he published his first novel, The Pickwick Papers, which proved to be popular.
* Most of Dickens’ books, including Oliver Twist, were published in monthly instalments (serials and periodicals), leaving readers to wait a month to find out what happened next.
* You can see how Dickens used cliff-hangers to maintain people’s interest by looking at the endings of chapters.
* Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of a friend in 1836 and together they had 10 children, although they separated in 1858.
* He had a lover affair with actress Ellen Ternan. His sympathy for ‘fallen women’ may have had something to do with this affair and he established a foundation where single mothers and prostitutes could learn a trade while being cared for.
* In 1860 he moved to a house near Rochester, Kent, where he died in 1870.
* Charles Dickens is buried in Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey.
* As well as writing, Dickens spent a lot of time touring the country and abroad, publicising his books and giving lectures. He was a champion of ‘human rights’ and his works have a strong moral undertone.
* He is known for his passionate defence of the poor and outcast in English society and for his satirical portrayals of the justice system, the social system and class prejudice.