



Preston Hall, the Ropner family and Stockton in the Victorian period



Preston Hall was bought by Robert Ropner in 1881 for £27,500.

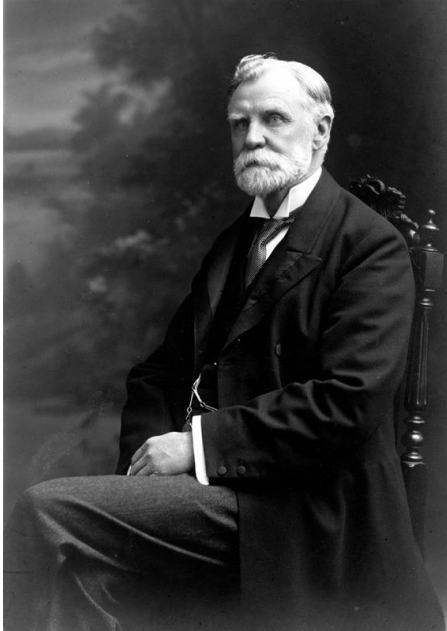
The Ropner family



The Ropner family in front of their house. Notice the servants peeking through the windows on the right of the photo!

Robert Ropner and his wife, Mary, moved into the hall in 1882.

Their youngest son, Leonard, inherited the house on his father's death and lived there until he died in 1937. He was the last person to use the house as a family home.



Sir Robert Ropner (1838 – 1924)

Emil Hugo Oscar Robert Ropner was born in Magdeburg in Prussia (now Germany). His parents died when he was a child, but left enough money for their 10 children to have a basic education.

Aged 19, Robert and a friend travelled to the docks in Hamburg intending to sail to Australia. There was only one place left on the ship so Robert decided to get on the next boat leaving port: it took him to West Hartlepool. Robert didn't speak any English and had very little money, but he was given work by a firm of coal exporters. Robert soon built up his own fleet of colliers and founded the Ropner Shipping Company in 1874.

He bought the north shore shipyard in Stockton and, by the early 1900s, his shipping company was the third largest in the country, employing over 1000 local people.

Robert never forgot the kindness of the local people who took him in when he first arrived in the country: he gave land, which became Ropner Park in Stockton, and he also paid for a convalescence home to be built in Stockton.

Robert was an MP for Stockton and served in the First World War. He was knighted in 1902 and created a Baronet in 1904. He died on 26 February 1924 aged 85 years.



Lady Mary Ropner (1836 – 1921)

Mary Ann Craik was born in Scotland. Her father was a baker.

She married Emil Hugo Oscar Robert Ropner in 1858.

Alongside her husband, Mary was an active supporter of the local community.

Mary and Robert had 10 children.

Mary died on 20 October 1921 aged 85 years.



A Victorian gentleman's house



Preston Hall in the 1880s

After he bought Preston Hall, Robert Ropner enlarged it to make it suitable for a wealthy Victorian gentleman. He added a music room, billiards room, winter garden and a large stone porch.

Changes in technology during Victorian times meant that Preston Hall was one of the first houses in the area to have electricity and a telephone.

Like many wealthy Victorians, Robert Ropner didn't just enlarge the house to suit his role as a gentleman, he also filled it with things to show how rich he was.

An inventory (a list) of items in the house was made during the time the Ropners lived there. Here are the things listed in just two rooms of the house!

Library: Indian carpet; hearthrug; sideboard; writing table; bookcases; 1 couch; 1 secretaire; 2 lounge chairs; 1 library chair; 1 easy chair; 6 occasion chairs; 1 marble clock; vases; jardiniere; 1 newspaper holder; bronze figures; 5 pictures, including a portrait of Robert Ropner; 500 books.

Drawing Room: carpet; bearskin rug; 2 cabinets; quartette tables; octagon table; gypsy table; circular table; marble figure; writing table; gilt table; upright pianoforte; musical box; musical chair; ottoman; settee; conversational settee; 5 easy chairs; 3 occasional chairs; clock in alabaster; Chinese ornaments and bottles; 10 Austrian china ornaments; Parian; 2 emu eggs; 3 ostrich eggs; a bog harp; 11 blue flowered Staffordshire china cups and 12 saucers; 15 pictures; 11 photos in easel frames; mirror; 20 photo frames; silver mounted spade used by Lady Ropner to cut the first sod (piece of soil) of Ropner park.

This seems like a huge amount of furniture and ornaments to us today, but it was quite normal for a wealthy Victorian family to have so many things; the Victorians liked to show how rich they were by the number of things they had in their houses.

Glossary

Secretaire: a small writing desk

Jardiniere: a plant stand or pot

Quartette table: a nest of 4 small tables

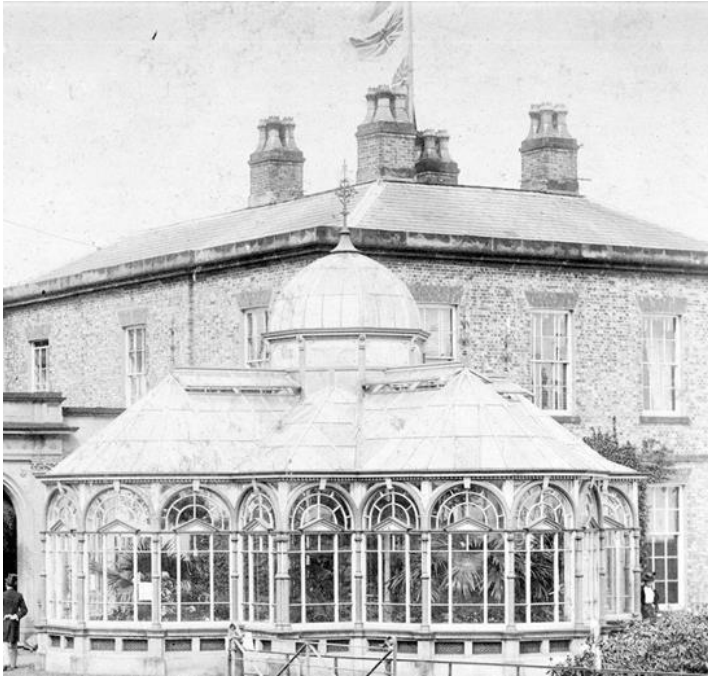
Gypsy table: a small, high, round table

Ottoman: a large, padded stool

Parian: a porcelain bust, made to look like marble, probably of Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert.



A Victorian gentleman's house



The Winter Garden in the 1880s

The Winter Garden

Winter Gardens were large conservatories made of wood, iron and glass, often with beautifully tiled floors. They were very popular with wealthy families in Victorian times and Robert Ropner added one to Preston Hall.

They were used by families as a place to relax, but also as an opportunity to entertain guests and show off their wealth.

As a warm space, the Winter Garden would have been filled with all sorts of exotic plants brought back to Britain by explorers.

The most prized plant in a Winter Garden was the very exotic pineapple. Some gardeners would even rent them out to houses!



One of Robert and Mary's daughters in the Winter Garden



People working in a Victorian house



Sir Robert and Lady Mary Ropner would have had a lot of servants to run their house.

They had their own rooms in one section of the house and also lived in lodges on the estate. We know that there was a separate entrance for servants and some of the servants' rooms (the Butler's pantry, kitchen, scullery, wash house, laundry and bedrooms) are now part of the museum's exhibition spaces.

The highest ranking servant was the Butler. He would have reported directly to the Ropners and he was in charge of all the male servants. The Butler was responsible for the Footman, Page and Groom. He would also have been the servant who spent the most time with the family upstairs.

The Housekeeper was responsible for most of the female

servants, including the Laundry/Scullery Maids, House Maids and Kitchen Maid. She had the authority of Lady Ropner to appoint and dismiss them and had to be very organised and make sure they were performing all their duties.

At least one gardener would have worked in the kitchen garden and a Governess would have been appointed to teach the children.

Lady Ropner would have appointed a Nurse, Lady's Maid and Cook herself.

In Victorian times life 'in service' was thought to be a good job because servants were clothed, fed and had somewhere to live, so their employers took responsibility for their lives. A servant's life was hard work, though, with long hours and they were constantly at the beck and call of their employers. The junior servants would wake before dawn to lay fires and prepare the house and they would go

to bed long after their employers had. They had very few breaks during the day too. Even the senior servants worked long hours.

The servants at Preston Hall worked hard, but we think that the Ropners were good employers and looked after them well.

This white cotton christening gown belonged to Lucy and Lawrence Judson. Lawrence was the Gardener at the hall and Lucy was Cook for the Ropner family.

In Victorian times, women were expected to give up their jobs when they were married, but Lucy was able to continue being the Cook after her wedding. This was really unusual and showed that the Ropners were not only good employers; they were also modern thinkers!



Victorian christening gown



Life in service in a Victorian house



Maid serving afternoon tea

Today, it is hard to imagine what life in service was like or what it would be like to have servants.

We are also used to having a lot of electrical equipment to help us run our homes.

We know, from census returns, that the Ropners had a lot of different servants so here are a few examples of the work they might do.

House Maids had a lot of different jobs; sometimes they served refreshments, like the maid in the photo, but mostly they cleaned the house, laid fires, lit candles and lanterns, made beds and emptied bed pans.



Maid's uniform

Carpets would be beaten using a wicker beater like the one in the photo. Fires were lit with help of bellows and it was a dirty job cleaning out the ash and polishing the grate.

The Laundry Maid, or Scullery Maid, washed and ironed all the family's clothes, bedding and towels, using carbolic soap a water pump and a mangle.

The Kitchen Maid helped the Cook in the kitchen, particularly preparing food and cleaning all the crockery and utensils.

Footmen served at the table at meal times, overseen by the butler.

The Governess taught and looked after the children. A Nursery Maid prepared the children's meals, cleaned their clothes and looked after the nursery.

The Lady's Maid looked after Lady Ropner; dressing her and doing her hair. She might also have looked after Lady Ropner's grown up daughters.



Carpet beater



Bellows to help light fires



Bedpan



Scrubbing brush



Flat iron



Crumb brush and pan



Victorian childhood



Play

Victorian children played lots of games (remember there were no televisions or computers!)

The Ropner children came from a wealthy family so they would have had toys such as a rocking horse, doll's house, wind-up toys, train sets, dolls and toy soldiers.

Poorer children often had home-made toys such as peg dolls, spinning tops and skipping ropes.

Children played outside with metal hoops and wooden skittles like the ones in our Victorian Street. They would also play games that we still see in playgrounds today such as hopscotch and ball games.



School

In early Victorian times most children never learned to read and write. Only boys from wealthy families went to school and, like the Ropner children, they would first be taught at home by a Governess until the age of 10, with the girls continuing to be taught at home. Schools were not free so poor children did not go at all and went out to work. In 1891 free schools were set up and all children had to attend until they were 12 years old.

Schools were very strict and children were punished with a cane. Lessons were formal; the teacher wrote on a blackboard and children learned by chanting facts. Paper was quite expensive so young children wrote on slates with a slate pencil. Older children learned to write on paper and handwriting was taught by copying words neatly from a copy book using dip pens and ink. If a teacher thought a child was slow to learn they would make them wear a dunce's hat and stand in the corner!



Teacher's cane



Slate and pencils



The Victorian Street



Our replica Victorian Street shows some of the businesses that Stockton people would have known. Some of the premises are just the shop front, but many of them are real shops and you can explore inside.

Jonathan Backhouse & Co - Bank (*shop front only*)

James Backhouse was a Quaker, originally from Lancashire. In 1774 he and his eldest son, Jonathan, formed the bank in Darlington. Jonathan married into another Quaker family; the Pease family, and the Backhouses became one of financiers of the Stockton and Darlington railway.

In 1896 Backhouse Bank merged with 2 other banks and became Barclay & Co (later Barclays Bank).

Photographer's Studio

Having your photograph taken was very popular in Victorian times, but cameras were expensive so people went to a photographer's studio and paid to have their photo taken. Wealthy families like the Ropners could afford for a photographer to come to their homes.

Taking a photograph was a slow process; people had to stay still for up to half an hour whilst the image developed on the glass plate in the back of the camera!



Cuthbert Webster - Grocer

Today we are used to buying everything packaged from the supermarket; in Victorian times people bought their food from the grocer's shop and everything would be weighed out. Victorians would buy food such as tea and flour loose and would have the amount they needed weighed out and packed into paper bags. Lady Ropner would not do her own shopping; a servant would take her order to the shop and then it would be delivered to the house – often by a delivery boy on a bike.



The Victorian Street

Lamb's Toy Shop

Wealthy families like the Ropners would buy toys from a toy shop like the one in our Victorian Street.

Poorer families would either have simple toys made for them (like peg dolls) or toys such as spinning tops and skipping ropes could be bought from street traders for a penny.



JF Smith & Co Confectionery - Sweetshop

The Victorians believed that sugar was good for you, as well as tasting delicious, so our sweetshop would have been very popular with richer families. Just like the grocer's shop, sweets would be weighed out for people to buy.

Police Station

The first professional policemen were set up in London in 1829 by Robert Peel, who was then the Home Secretary, after the Metropolitan Police Act. Policemen were nicknamed "Bobbies" or "Peelers" after him. Policemen wore a long blue coat and a tall hat, which was strengthened to protect them from blows to the head. Their only means of defence was a truncheon and they also carried a whistle or rattle to raise the alarm.



Outside of London, police forces were slow to be set up and it was not until the 1856 Police Act that everywhere set up their own police force.

Crimes in Victorian times included pick pocketing (often by children), theft and murder. The most serious crimes could result in the criminal being hanged, but this became less popular in Victorian times and criminals were often transported instead – usually to Australia.

Cooper's Fish and Chip Shop (*shop front only*)

Fried fish and chips existed separately for years, but they really came together as a dish in the Victorian period. The earliest known fish and chip shops were opened in 1860 in London and near Oldham in Lancashire. Charles Dickens mentions "fried fish warehouses" in 'Oliver Twist' and one of the earliest use of the word "chips" is in his book 'A Tale of Two Cities'.

The development of the railways connected ports to industrial cities and meant that fresh fish could be quickly transported to wider markets.

Fish and chips would have been wrapped in newspaper, like the ones in our shop window. In fact, this continued until the 1980s when it was decided that the ink was not safe against food and a sheet of greaseproof paper was added. Today your fish and chips will come wrapped in plain paper or in a cardboard or polystyrene box.



The Victorian Street

Peat Oberon - Blacksmith (*working forge*)

Victorian blacksmiths made everything from horse shoes and nails to tools and farm machinery. A blacksmith had to be good at maths and have some business skills so they were often also asked to hold offices such as being a magistrate because they were intelligent. Working in a forge was hot work and the fire would have burned all day.

Our working forge is run by Peat Oberon. He makes a whole range of ironmongery (but not horse shoes!) and teaches ironworking skills.



JW Summers Farrier (*shop front only*)

A Victorian farrier might work closely with a blacksmith, especially as he would be making horse shoes, but the farrier's work was more than just making the shoes. He needed to have a good understanding of a horse's anatomy to fit shoes properly so his work made him a high status member of Victorian society and farriers in early Victorian times were like vets.

Before the railways, horses were vital to transport so a farrier's job was essential.

Notice the steps outside our Farrier's shop that seem to just go into the wall? You would climb up them to get onto your horse.

Edwin John Finch - Joiner and Undertaker

Victorian people were much more used to seeing, and dealing with, death than we are today especially with poor living conditions.

An undertaker was also a carpenter, so as well as making coffins they would make, and repair, things for homes and shops.

You can see the hearse in our undertaker's shop. Wealthy funerals would see this pulled with 6 black horses, wearing ostrich feather plumes on their heads. Poor people would be taken away on a simple cart.

Usually only men went to funerals; Victorians believed that it would be too upsetting for women.

Stork & Castle Public House (*shop front only*)

Pubs were important places for people to gather. In Victorian times it was where they would get their news and it was also a popular place for political gatherings.

There was not a lot of clean drinking water in Victorian times either and cholera was common so beer was much safer to drink.



The Victorian Street

J Walker - Chemist

John Walker was a chemist on High Street, Stockton. He invented the friction match and sold bundles of them from his shop. We know that he sold his first matches on 12 April 1827 to a Stockton solicitor called Mr Hixon; who bought a tin box of 100. Walker did not patent his invention and was only credited for it after his death.



As a qualified chemist John Walker could mix and create his own drugs, as well as sell ready made products.

Watson, Son, Brigham & Co – Tearooms

Tearooms were the first public places where Victorian women could eat alone, or with other female friends, without a male escort. Visitors to our tearoom can enjoy a slice of Victoria sponge cake, which takes its name from Queen Victoria. The cake was probably originally made for children (since most cakes had seeds or fruit they were thought to be not child-safe) before becoming a favourite at the adults' table.

J Gray - Glass, China & Earthenware Shop (*shop front only*)

This shop would sell anything from china dinner services to stoneware foot warmers.

L Thorman - Printers & Stationers

Printed materials like newspapers and books became more popular in Victorian times, particularly with improved printing presses which meant material could be mass produced and the railways meant they could be widely distributed.



Our print shop has a Columbian Press, which was designed to produce large forms (a page of typeset) such as broadsheet newspapers. It also houses an Albion Press; a simpler press, which was used for book printing. You will also see a range of wooden printing blocks.

Thomas Wilks: Silk Mercer, Laceman, Draper, Haberdasher - Draper's Shop

Draper was the name of someone who made woollen cloth, but it soon became the name for anyone who bought and sold cloth and textiles. Our draper's shop would have sold a range of fancy items such as gloves, fans and ostrich feathers. Gloves were essential for any rich Victorian lady or gentleman and fans were important evening wear for Victorian ladies. Ostrich feathers were exotic and used on the finest hats. Many draper's shops also sold 'skirt lifters'; a small metal clamp which hung from a cord on a lady's waist and then gripped the hem so that she could lift her skirt to avoid dirt or so she could move quickly. They were usually beautifully designed.