

### Victorian Slang Trivia

The Victorian era was witness to the rise of industry and with it came some new-fangled slang. This activity will give some background on the era and then present you with a trivia quiz related to common phrases of the Victorian era.

#### Preparations & How-To's

- This is a copy of the complete activity. Use the trivia questions to spark a conversation.
  - Do more! Two additional Victorian themed ideas are suggested in [Additional Activities](#).
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### Victorian Slang Trivia

Queen Victoria was such a popular monarch of Britain that the 63-year period (1837–1901) of her reign is called the Victorian era. The Victorian era saw the Industrial Revolution, which brought with it great social change and political reform. The rise of science-based medicine plus great inventions, including the telephone and the telegraph, happened during this time.

The rise of industry created an expanding middle class, whose focus on morality, respectability, charity, and self-discipline changed the culture dramatically. Slavery was abolished, servitude for women and children was frowned upon, and public education became mandatory. There was a push for universal literacy, and reading became very popular. Because books were still rather expensive, libraries were opened and became one of the most loved public works.

The arts and theater were also popular, including comic operas by people such as Gilbert and Sullivan. Victorians thrived on spectacle, including brass bands, circuses, and even paranormal entertainments.

With the rise in both literacy and interest in the arts came an interest in language itself. The Victorian era gave rise to a vocabulary all its own. Can you guess the meaning of these common words and phrases from the time?

1. What is a “boneshaker”?

**Answer:** A boneshaker is a bicycle. The bicycle was invented in the 1860s. It had a small front wheel and a large back wheel made first of wood and later of steel. It was primarily ridden on cobblestone streets, and it did indeed shake your bones!

Example: “I drove an entire mile on that boneshaker!”



2. What is a “doorknocker”?

**Answer:** A doorknocker was a popular style of beard. The cheeks and chin were shaved, leaving hair under the chin and on each side of the mouth, which connected with the mustache and looked something like a door knocker. “His doorknocker is quite distinguished.”

3. What does it mean to say someone is “arf’arf’an’arf”?

**Answer:** It means they are very drunk, that they’ve had many “arfs,” or half-pints. “You’d better get him home. He’s arf’arf’an’arf.”

4. What are “collie shangles”?

**Answer:** Collie shangles are arguments or quarrels. It was a Scottish term, taken from fights between dogs, and Queen Victoria used it in her journal, which was published in 1884 and titled *More Leaves*. Here is her quote: “At five minutes to eleven rode off with Beatrice, good Sharp going with us, and having occasional collie shangles (a Scottish word for quarrels or rows but taken from fights between dogs) with collies when we came near cottages.”

5. What does it mean if someone asks you to “mind the grease”?

**Answer:** They are asking you to let them pass by, especially in a crowd. “Excuse me, please, mind the grease.”

6. What’s a “rain napper”?

**Answer:** It’s an umbrella. “It’s a right downpour—I’d better grab my rain napper.”

7. What does it mean to “shoot into the brown”?

**Answer:** It means to fail. The term comes from rifle practice, when the shot misses the target altogether and goes into the earth. “Well, I really shot into the brown on that one, didn’t I?”

8. What are you drinking if you “smother a parrot”?

**Answer:** Absinthe. This strong drink is made of wormwood, fennel, and star anise, giving it a green color and licorice flavor. It could cause hallucinations and had its heyday during the Victorian era.

9. Is “butter on bacon” a compliment or a criticism?

**Answer:** It’s a criticism. It means “excessive extravagance” or to be “over the top” in modern terms. “You’re going to put lace and ruffles on your gown? Isn’t that a little butter on bacon?”

10. What is “cat-lap”?

**Answer:** It was a derisive London society term for tea or coffee, used by those who prefer beer or hard alcohol. It was sometimes used as a euphemism for champagne as well.

11. What does it mean if you’ve “got the morbs”?

**Answer:** It means you’re down in the dumps, that you’re melancholy. *Morbs* means “morbid.” “I don’t think I’ll be going with you girls today. I’ve got the morbs.”

12. What does it mean to be “afternoonified”?

**Answer:** It means to look sharp or smart, as opposed to dowdy. It’s a compliment to be called afternoonified. “That new suit is quite afternoonified.”

13. What does “bang up to the elephant” mean?

**Answer:** It means something is perfect or that it couldn’t be better. “What a great day we’re having! It’s bang up to the elephant!”

14. What does “umble-cum-stumble” mean?

**Answer:** It means “to understand completely.” “I finally umble-cum-stumble how to bake the perfect cake.”

15. What’s a “gigglemug”?

**Answer:** It’s someone who’s always smiling and in a good mood. “Old Henry is quite the gigglemug, isn’t he?”

16. What’s a “church bell”?

**Answer:** It’s a talkative person, someone who never stops talking. “Uh-oh. Quick, let’s go. That church bell Larry is heading this way.”

17. What does it mean to “make a stuffed bird laugh”?

**Answer:** It means that something is completely ridiculous or preposterous. “The idea of me deciding to skydive would make a stuffed bird laugh.”

18. What is a Chuckaboo?

**Answer:** It’s a term of endearment for a close friend. “Hey, Chuckaboo, how are you today?”

19. What are “whooperups”?

**Answer:** They are enthusiastic but untalented singers. “The last three karaoke singers were quite the whooperups, weren’t they?”

20. What does it mean if you “cop a mouse”?

**Answer:** It means you’ve gotten a black eye. “Whoa, look at you. How did you cop a mouse?”

### Discussion Starters

- Were you familiar with any of these words and phrases? If so, which ones?
- Would you like to see any of these phrases come back into common usage today? Which ones?
- What slang phrases can you think of that were popular when you were younger? Are any of them still in use today?

### Additional Activities

1. Enjoy watching the stars of the new movie *Enola Holmes* try to [guess Victorian slang words and phrases](#).
2. Watch *Enola Holmes*, which is set in the Victorian era. It’s available on Netflix.