

# Victorian Costuming Guidelines

The Holly Dickens Festival is a theatrically historical re-creation of 19th-century London, seen through the eyes of author Charles Dickens. Though Mr. Dickens' writing spans a good portion of the mid-to-late 1800s, our costume timeline for the Dickens Fair is set to the years of 1842-1863.

*The Holly Dickens Festival* creates a fully immersive environment in which the clothes each person wears become part of the visual tapestry of the event. When creating your costume to attend as a patron (costumes are encouraged, but *never* required!), we encourage you to consider your character, your occupation and/or class, and why you are visiting London at Christmas-time! Wearing a coat, shawl, wrap, bonnet, hat, scarf or gloves while "on the streets of London" is one wonderful way to become part of our illusion of Christmas Eve in Victorian England.

Corsets were the foundation garment of the time. Women wore crinolines and many, many starched petticoats to hold up the voluminous bell-shaped skirts that were in fashion. Neither the high empire waist of the 1820s-30s nor the bustle of the late 1860s-80s, beautiful as they are, fit into the timeline of the Dickens Christmas Fair.

If you are attending as a less well-to-do character, a good thing to remember is that in this time period, few things changed owners more often than clothes. They traveled "downwards" from grade to grade in the social scale with remarkable regularity. The original owner may sell a well-worn garment to a "clabberer" who would use their arts to make it almost as good as new and then resell it to someone else, and the cycle would continue through the various classes. To represent the era, please refrain from carrying modern day purses and bags, wearing modern style and color footwear, clothing with logos. It is recommended that volunteers layer their costumes with cotton inner layer. For the real frigid days, a wool layer would go over the cotton layer and under the outer garment. This is historically the most effective way to combat cold weather elements.

## *Fabrics & Colors*

Suggested fabrics are natural fabrics such as wool, twill, serge, cotton velvet, satin, taffeta, cotton, and linen.

Colors were rich and varied - garnet, plum, moss green, gold, gray, beige, brown, blue, and black. Fabric patterns were interesting and fun, including plaids, prints, paisleys, stripes, herringbone, and tweeds. Because it is winter, your color choices would likely reflect this.

## *Recommended Movie & TV Sources for Costuming*

There are many books and movies that are excellent sources for costume, manners and accent of the time we are portraying. Below is a selection of some potentially useful films.

- The story of Adele H. or L'histoire d'Adele H. (French movie about British events, subtitled) - Women's garments and military costume.
- Fingersmith (BBC production, 2005) - Great representation of lower-class Cockneys as well as upper class, set in the early 1860s
- Christmas Carol (Patrick Stewart) - Fabulous for all classes.
- Oliver Twist (Elijah Wood, Disney) - The color palette is excellent for The Dockside area, or Mad Sal's.
- BBC David Copperfield miniseries - Starring a young Daniel Radcliffe. This is a very good movie and an excellent source for visuals.
- Nicholas Nickleby (2002) - A wonderful movie full of approvable costume ideas and colorful characters. Highly recommended for this Fair.
- Little Women (Winona Ryder, 1994) - Great middle-class 1860s costumes; ignore that later 1870s bustle costumes towards the end of the film.
- North & South (based on an Elizabeth Gaskell novel, BBC production, 2004) - Lovely upper-middle class 1860s costumes.
- Oliver Twist (Roman Polanski dir, 2005) - Interesting lower class, fabulous middle class costumes especially on the extras in the street scenes.
- The Secret Life of Mrs. Beeton (BBC production, 2006) - About Catherine Beeton, the Englishwoman who wrote a hugely popular

cooking/household management book in the 1850s. Nice middle class costumes.

- Turn of the Screw (based on the Henry James novel, 1999) - Nice 1840s middle class.
- The Great Train Robbery with Sean Connery, Donald Sutherland and Leslie Ann-Down
- Bleak House (BBC miniseries, 2005) - There is also a 1985 version which is truer to the book and has excellent costumes.
- Little Dorrit (BBC miniseries, 2008) - There is a 1987 version in two parts with great costumes and terrific street scenes.
- The Old Curiosity Shop (Carnival Films, 2007)
- Edward VII/Edward the King (ATV miniseries, 1975) The first 3 episodes focus on Victoria and Albert up to Albert's death, while the last 3 focus more on Edward; still, great costuming and the history is bang-on.
- The Young Victoria (2009) The early costumes are well done; the history, so-so.
- Scrooge (1970 with Albert Finney) Terrific crowd scenes and good costumes
- The Muppet Christmas Carol (1992) A remarkably good adaptation of the book with very good costumes!

# Female Presenting Costumes

The fashionable Victorian lady wore a multiplicity of garments that reflected their station in life. Their clothing was frequently a little restrictive and confining. Servants or other working individuals wore much simpler clothing in fewer layers.

The basic shape was tightly corseted on top and a rounded "bell" shape from the waist down. All female presenting clothing included petticoats, even for the poor. The "crinoline" or hoop skirt was all the rage with the mid to upper classes.

Sleeves were long with a variety of widths from tightly fitted jackets to the wide 3/4 "pagoda" sleeves with a second set of white cotton sleeves underneath. Necklines for the daytime were high, and balls didn't start until late in the evening. Since the Fair is open only until 6:00pm, ball gowns should not be worn during the day.

No respectable London inhabitant would go out without a hat! Look for hats that can be shaped into bonnets to be tied underneath the chin or make a simple "mob cap" if you're one of the working classes. Female presenting individuals did not wear top hats, of any size.

Aprons, shawls, brooches, market baskets, reticules, and lace collars can complete your costume. This is a period where lots of "bibs and bobs" add character and "texture" to what you are wearing.

## *Special Notes on Working Class*

Working-class costumes are less expensive and generally more comfortable to wear. Cottons and similar fabrics can be laundered rather than dry-cleaned. Working-class costume consists of drawers, chemise or undershirt, socks, shoes, corset, possible corset cover, petticoats, outerwear, hair covering, and gloves. For the working class, you have a choice between a dress or a white blouse with a skirt. The standard skirt is made from 3 lengths of fabric gathered, pleated or gauged onto a waistband. Only ladies with small waists will need to gore the panels. Aprons and mob caps are also appropriate for many vocations. Working class characters have plenty of choices that can be added to their accessories.

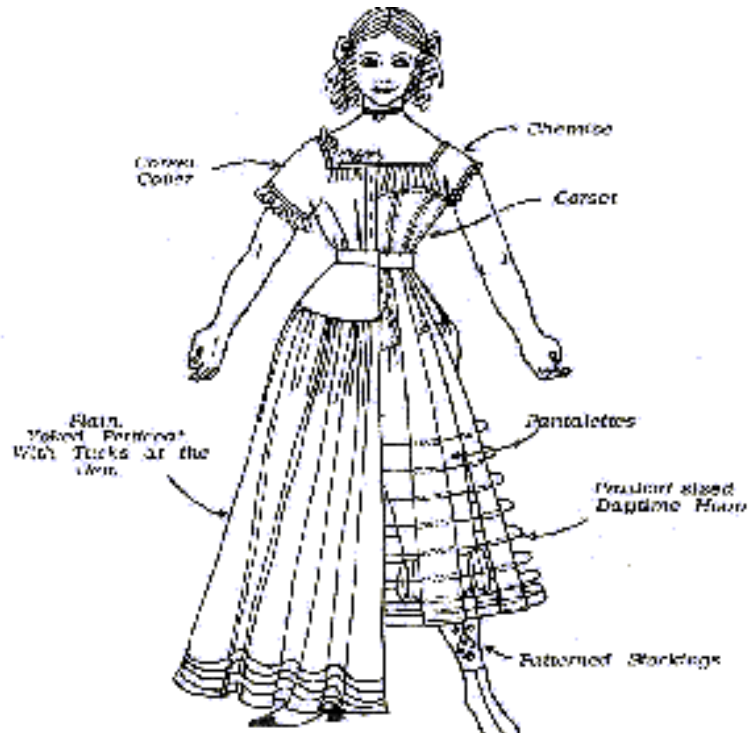
## *Special Notes on Middle Class*

Middle-class costumes are of course more expensive to produce and maintain. It is also more work to wear. it requires all the above items and

also a hoop skirt or large crinoline. Dress, corset, crinoline or hoop, and accessories can easily run in excess of \$500 to have made, and you can spend this on materials alone even if you are making the costume yourself. Skirts are made in the same way as working-class skirts. Bodices should be backed onto a lightweight duck (canvas) and lightly boned to stay smooth over a corset.

## *Starting a New Costume*

Once you have selected your character and decided on some basic background information, the next step is to clothe your character. You should have your corset and petticoats complete before you start your dress; corsets and petticoats can dramatically change the shape of your body and the distance to the floor. Also, prewash your materials unless they are dry clean only.



## *Undergarments*

Proper undergarments are crucial in achieving the Victorian silhouette. The wasp waist was a gift of the tightly laced corset, and the skirts were supported by a vast number of petticoats, starched and flounced, or a lesser number of petticoats and a hoop. The undergarments worn by most female presenting individuals included:

- *Chemise* - A sleeveless or short-sleeved scoop-necked lightweight cotton or linen blouse
- *Pantalets or drawers*
- *Corset* - Not usually worn by lower-class women, although some sort of shaping garment will help the look.

- *Petticoats* - As many as six or seven; once the crinoline was developed, some of these layers could be left off. The hoop skirt gained a foothold in the mid-1850s and eventually replaced the large number of petticoats formerly worn.

## *Blouses*

Blouses were always long-sleeved and high-necked. They were either collarless or had a small Peter Pan style collar, made of self fabric or a detachable knitted or crocheted one. Cuffs were narrower than modern ones. Blouses were usually worn with a wide belt (known as a Swiss or Medici belt) and a jacket called a Zouave. A blouse worn without a jacket was considered very informal, on about the same level as a housedress.



Blouses were almost always made of plain white cotton, sometimes embroidered or trimmed with lace and buttoned up the front.



## *Skirts*

Although a great variety of skirt styles were available, all were very full, at least 120" around the bottom hem. Waistbands were about 2" wide. Skirts should be hemmed so that they do not drag and, to avoid overcrowding, we ask that your hoops be 110" or smaller.



## *Bodices*

A day dress bodice had a high neck and long sleeves. It buttoned or hooked up the front (occasionally up the back) and was usually sewn to the skirt, though it was almost always constructed separately. The skirt and bodice fabric matched.



## *Jackets*

Jackets and jacket-type bodices were commonly worn in the 1850s and almost completely replaced the back lacing or hooking bodice for day wear. They usually had bell-shaped or pagoda sleeves; fastened with ties, frogs, or hooks; and were cut very wide over the hips or had a separate flared skirting sewn to it at the waistline.

Another popular jacket style was the zouave, or bolero, that came down only to the waist or a little above. The sleeves were long and cylindrical and sometimes slit up the back of the arm to the elbow. This collar-less jacket was cut away in a curve in the front and had no front fastening, except maybe a hook and eye or button and loop at the neck.

## Outerwear

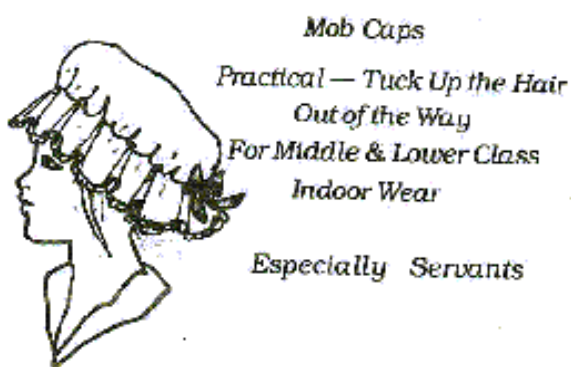
Choices for outerwear include the shawl, cape or cloak, coat, or pelerine (a shoulder cape with long lappets hanging down the front).

## Hair

Victorian ladies wore their hair up. At the minimum, it can be pulled into a ponytail and pinned into a bun. Traditional hairstyles were generally parted down the center, sometimes with organized curls. Ladies did not wear their hair loose and flowing.

## Hats & Headwear

Adult female presenting individuals were socially required to cover their hair. Day caps protected the hair from dirt acquired through everyday activities - smoke from fireplaces, grease from cooking, dust from travel, etc. Caps also covered hair which was washed infrequently - it was generally thought unhealthy to wash hair too often. It was easier to put on a clean cap.



The more mature the Victorian Lady, the more of the hair was covered. A working-class individual would also tend to cover more of their hair. We suggest a day cap for indoor wearing and under your bonnet or hat. There were many varieties of bonnet or hat styles (all elaborately trimmed) or, for the lower classes, a simple mob cap.



## *Accessories*

In Victorian times, cosmetics were used with discretion and consisted mostly of a little face powder. Because we are a theatrical event with lighting that enhances our “twilight ambience,” every participant should consider wearing *subtle* makeup so as to not appear “washed out” in the streets and shops.

Shoes were typically laced-up boots for outdoor wear. Stockings went over the knee and were knitted out of cotton, wool, or silk and were often embroidered.

Gloves were either colored kid leather or lace. Generally, short gloves were worn with day dresses.

Reticules or purses were made of fabric to match or coordinate with the dress, or were knitted, crocheted, tatted, or netted of fine silk. These purses could also be embroidered or beaded.

Jewelry for day wear was generally less elaborate than for evening wear and included small earrings, rings, brooches, and pins. Cameos were very popular, as were pearls.

Other accessories include muffs, fans, parasols, aprons, and market baskets.

# Male Presenting Costumes



The Victorian gentleman of fashion dressed more simply than their female presenting counterpart, but their garments, though less confining and restrictive, still managed to fully express their exalted station in life. Middle-class individuals generally wore the same style of garments as those in the upper-class, though they were not as well-cut or made from such fine materials. The middle class also tended to dress more soberly and respectably than their upper-class counterparts. The lower class dressed in a manner more utilitarian than fashionable.

To get dressed, you will need these essentials:

- Shirt
- Cravat
- Waistcoat (vest - long enough to cover the waistband of the pants by 1-2")
- Trousers (high-waisted, no cuffs, no pleats, no belt loops) worn with suspenders, not a belt
- Gloves
- A hat (top hat or bowler)
- A good pair of boots/shoes that are period and comfortable enough to stand on cement all day
- Dark socks
- A coat
- Outerwear



Additionally, top hats, snap brims, walking sticks, and pocket watches with chains will help complete your ensemble.

Trousers can be well-fitted (straight legged), thick corduroy or wool, plain in color or in checks and plaids. Waistcoats (vests) should overlap your pants at the waist and be squared off at the bottom. There are three basic coat styles of the time: the morning coat, frock coat, and sack coat.

Shirts were white, colored, or striped. Collars were smaller than those of today and were sometimes turned up. Cravats (neck ties) were colorful and could be tied many different ways. Aprons and shawls (yes, men wore them too!) go far to cover up costume sins and are perfect for tradesmen, clerks, and vendors.

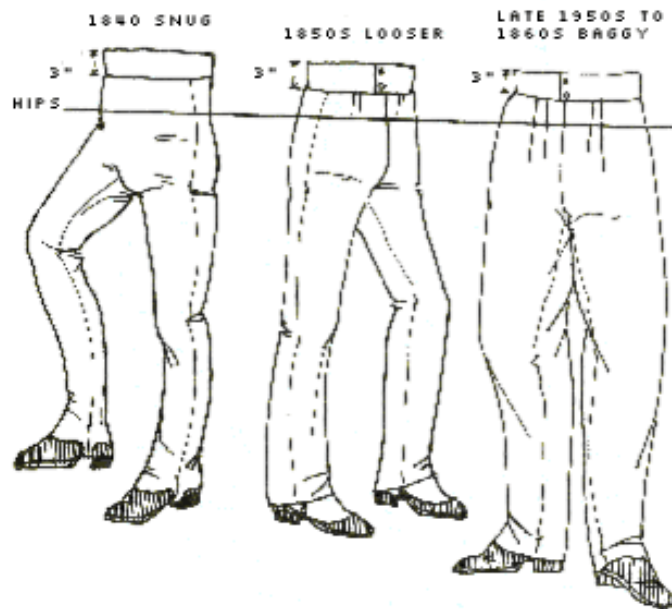
## *Shirts*

A basic shirt is similar in almost all respects to the modern white dress shirt. The collar was part of the shirt and was worn turned up, with the cravat tied over it and the collar points sometimes turned down at the corners over the cravat.

## *Trousers*

Trouser styles vary depending on the decade, though throughout our time period the waistlines were high, typically above the navel. In the 1840s they were narrow and tapered inward down to the instep with a strap going under the foot.

In the 1850s the strap disappeared, and trousers became a little looser, though still snug to the leg. In the 1860s the "peg-top" trousers, wide at the top and tapering to the ankles, became fashionable. Formal evening trousers were always black, though for formal day wear they were usually a color that contrasted with the coat with white, fawn, and pale gray being the favored colors. For more casual wear (and for the more flamboyant), striped, check, and plaid fabrics were used.



A male presenting Victorian did not wear flared, bell-bottomed, or cuffed trousers, or with visible pockets in the back.



MORNING COAT      TAILCOAT 1858      FROCK COAT 1850S

## Waistcoats

Waistcoats (today called vests) were often the most colorful or lavishly trimmed part of a Victorian Gentleman's attire. In the 1840s it was most often single-breasted; the double-breasted style became more popular in the 1850s and 60s.

The waistcoat was cut straight across the bottom and came a little below the natural waistline. It had at least two pockets, sometimes three or four. The collar and lapel were sometimes cut as one, sometimes separate with the usual notch between.

Waistcoats were made of wool (both tweed and plaid), satin, brocade (embroidered or plain), or velvet (often the cut or figured type).

## Coats

Styles included the frock coat, sack coat, morning coat, and tailcoat.

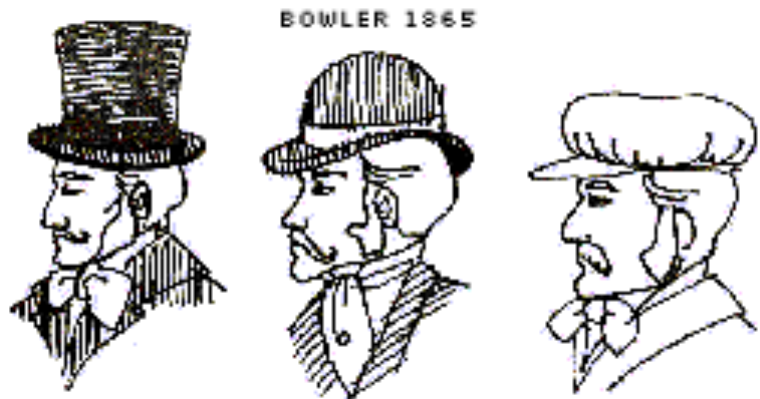
The tailcoat was most popular exclusively for evening wear, and the sack coat was considered suitable only for informal wear.

## Capes & Outer Coats

All male presenting individuals wore overcoats and capes at night and in inclement weather. Short capes were worn for traveling or country wear. Modern overcoats are very similar to the Victorian model.

## Hair & Facial Hair

Male presenting individuals wore their hair shorter in the mid-century than they had previously. The clean-shaven look of the Regency was out, and moustaches, mutton-chop sideburns, Piccadilly Weepers, full beards, and Van Dykes were the order of the day. Consider wearing your hair in a different style or manner. You will be surprised how much it can help you assume your chosen character!



## Hats

Male presenting individuals usually wore some kind of head covering when out-of-doors. The top hat was the style favored by the Victorian Gentlemen; the derby hat or cloth cap was favored by the lower classes.

## Accessories

- *Shoes* were most often ankle boots. A Victorian Gentleman's stockings were knee length and almost universally black.
- *Gloves* were worn by Victorian Gentlemen and were wrist-length, buttoned at the wrist, and made of kid or other soft leather.
- A Victorian Gentleman carried a *pocket watch* on a chain in a watch pocket in the waistcoat.

- *Cravats* were worn by all male presenting individuals with a turned-up collar.
- *Other accessories* included umbrellas, canes, walking sticks, mufflers, aprons, sleeve protectors, and handkerchiefs.



# Thrift Shop Costuming & Children

*Thrift stores* are excellent for finding clothing for middle- or lower-class characters that can be adapted to the Victorian silhouette with a small amount of sewing. We recommend perusing all the Victorian Costuming pages before venturing out on your shopping trip.

When possible, choose natural fabrics which will be more comfortable, not polyester or nylon. Look in all sections for any gender! Spring and summer are great times to find winter clothing at thrift shops. Scarves, shawls, and gloves are often far more plentiful in the warm months than in the fall or winter. Have fun hunting!

## *Female Presenting*

- Shoes - Lace-up boots are the best; for comfort, keep the heels as low as possible - under 1-1/2" is best. Mary Janes and ballet flats also fit the look and are often available in comfort brands.
- Check the sleepwear section or summer sleeveless shirts for chemises, drawers, and corset covers.
- Chemises can be made from a nightgown sewn up the front with the buttons removed so they're not digging in under your corset.
- Pajama pants can be shortened and have a little lace sewn to the bottoms to make drawers. You may also want to remove the crotch seam so that it is easier to use the restrooms in your corset and hoops!
- Plain, white cotton, high-necked, long-sleeved blouses that button up either the front or back are great. They should have either a peter pan collar or be collarless. Sleeves should have fullness to them and narrow cuffs. Stay away from the styles that resemble turn-of-the-century clothing (lots of lace, lace that comes to a V in front, or blouses with lots of fullness where the shoulder seam and sleeve meet). Don't forget to check the "men's section" for plain white shirts as well.
- A female presenting suit jacket can be turned into a fashionable Zouave jacket
- Wool hats can be cut and steamed into shape as an acceptable bonnet. Look for knitted or crocheted shawls. Large lace doilies

make great day caps to be worn under your bonnet - just add ribbon and some small silk flowers. And do remember your gloves!

## *Male Presenting*

- Shoes - Round-toed lace up dress shoes are relatively easy to find in thrift stores. Half boots with elastic on the side are correct for the time period and look very nice with a tapered pant leg.
- Choose baggy, flat fronted pants (go one or 2 sizes up from what you normally wear), taper the legs, press out the center front crease, remove or lower the cuffs, remove the belt loops and replace with suspender buttons. Add a set of braces or suspenders to create the look. For our time period, the waistline was above the navel, so choosing pants a little larger will give you more room in the crotch to wear them higher. Plaids, houndstooth and tweeds add texture to your outfit.
- Buy an old vest and square off the bottom by folding under the points - make sure it is long enough to overlap the top of your pants by a full two inches.
- Vests and pants do not have to match. You can wear a plaid with a tweed and without fear of hassle by the fashion police!
- Adapt long-sleeved white dress shirts by cutting off the fold-over collar right at the top and finishing off the edge. At this time, the body of the shirt and the cuffs and collar of the shirts were the same color. If you are portraying a tradesman or laborer, consider a plaid shirt in muted colors.
- An old woolen overcoat can become either a sack coat or a frock coat with clever adjustments. Men also wore shawls to keep out the cold. Look in the scarf area for long rectangular pieces for use as neckwear.

## Children

Keep in mind that both boy-presenting children and girl-presenting children dressed very closely to the way their parents dressed.

**Boy Presenting Children:** Female presenting suit jackets often make excellent jackets for male presenting youth. If it's a full suit (jacket and skirt/pants) see if the pants can be made to fit the young one or turn the skirt into a vest. A female presenting blouse can also be used for shirts as well.

**Girl Presenting Children:** Full-skirted dresses (lots of pleats or gathering at the waist) are great for adapting to skirts or petticoats for female presenting youth. Remember that the length of a youth's skirt is determined by their age - the older the child, the longer the skirt - from just below the knee for a 4-year-old, to ankle length for a 16-year-old. Pantaloon/drawers would show below the skirts.

