



Victorian Washing Machines

If you owned a hand-cranked washing machine in Victorian England, you were one lucky woman. If you were like most women, however, you did your washing by hand. In this short video, Avi Benn (AKA Mary-Ann Bird) plunges into the laborious—and sexist—world of Victorian clothes washing.

00:01

Nick Dennis stands with Mary-Ann Bird among several different Victorian-Era washing tools

NICK: This is Mrs. Mary-Ann Bird, and she's going to teach me about domestic life during the Victorian Era. So Mrs. Bird, what is this?

MRS.BIRD: This is called a washer wringer, and this is the equivalent of the Rolls Royce. This is what you would have if you were the rich. And it's a washing machine with a wringer, so that you would put your clothes in here, and the drum rotates, and then when the clothes have been washed, then they go through the wringer. You want to have a go at turning the handle? But mind your fingers!

00:55

Washer with wringer features a tub and a wringer, which features hand crank-operated rollers that would press water out of clothing

So you would put the clothes through there and it would squeeze the water out, but as I said, this is what you would have if you were rich. You wouldn't do the washing yourself. You would have the washer woman that came in two or three times a week, and she would work in the wash house. If you were an ordinary person, then these are the kind of things that you would use. This would be your washing machine. And you would soak your clothes from Saturday night, because Saturday night was when you had your bath, and that's when you changed your clothes, because you only had a bath once a week. And so you would change your clothes and you would soak them, and then Monday morning was wash day. So you would boil all your water on the range, fill your washing tub with water and then grate your soap into it and get all nice lather, and then you would use the dolly. And the dolly is this three-legged stool, and you would pound and twist your clothes. So pound and twist for half an hour.

For an "ordinary person", the washing machine is just a simple metal tub.

Dolly features two wooden handles and three prongs attached to a round paddle at the end that would stimulate the laundry

02:03

Nick Dennis gives the pounding/twisting motion a try

So, do you want to have a feel of what that would be like? So you're actually pounding away and twisting, you don't need to go to the gym, not in Victorian times, because you do enough exercise. And you have to actually do that for half an hour, because remember, on a Monday morning everybody else is hanging their washing out. And they all have a little look, "Mrs. Jenkins' washing is just as good as it was, but have you seen what her from number four has hung out? Well if she thinks that's white, it's not, it's gray, I don't know how she has the gall to do that!" So it was pride to actually hang out washing that was as white as you could possibly get it.

02:46

Mrs. Bird picks up the more modern version of the dolly, which looks like a large, cone-shaped plunger with handles

This is the more modern version, and this is called a posser, but sometimes people called it a paunch or a punch, depending on whereabouts in the country you come from. And what you do with this, is that you pound it up and down in the washtub, rather than having the circular motion, because this has been designed so that it will be more efficient. So, do you want to have a feel of that? Because what happens with this, is that you're creating almost a vacuum as you are pounding it up and down. Because the force of the pounding forces the water through the fibers and releases the dirt. So, in theory this is more efficient than that, but it's still hard work, and you still have to do it for half an hour.

Mrs. Bird hands the more modern dolly to Nick to try

03:35

And of course, if you were a girl, then quite often on a Monday morning, eh, you wouldn't go to school, because school, let's face it, education wasn't that important for girls, because you would be kept at home to actually help your mum do the washing. NICK: So, just to be clear, it was only women and girls who did this type of work? MRS. BIRD: Oh yes, that was, that was women's work. Men didn't do it, good gracious, no. They would do perhaps other things, like, sit in the chair and read the paper. Housework was women's work, was girls' work, and girls worked with their mother to actually learn how to be a wife and a mother. That was their role in life. And girls' education wasn't thought to be that important, because up until 1891 education in this country, school wasn't free, so why waste money on educating girls? So it was a very sexist society for many, many years, but yes. Washing was for women.