The Victorians caused the meat eating crisis the world faces today—but they might help us solve it

January 21 2019, by Paul Young

Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Increasing consumption of meat rich diets throughout the world in the 21st century raises pressing concerns about human health, animal welfare and environmental sustainability. Too much mass-produced meat is bad for us, bad for the livestock we eat, and bad for the planet on

which we live.

If we want to understand how the world arrived at this point, as well as how we might change it for the better, we should look back to the Victorian period, which laid the foundations for modern globalised [meat production and consumption](#).

Concerns today about what has become known as the "global meat complex" focus on the technologically driven overproduction and consumption of livestock. There's a recognition in particular that "the middle classes around the world eat too much meat", as a 2014 Friends of the Earth [report](#) put it. But the root of this problem can be traced to 19th-century Britain, when global meat markets emerged as a revolutionary way of dealing with a mid-Victorian "meat famine".

Famine and feast

The famine was caused by a mismatch between a fast increasing, urbanising population and a levelling out in domestic [meat production](#). What helped stave it off was the groundbreaking development of preservation and transportation technologies that enabled the British to eat livestock that was reared, slaughtered and processed in the Americas and Australasia.
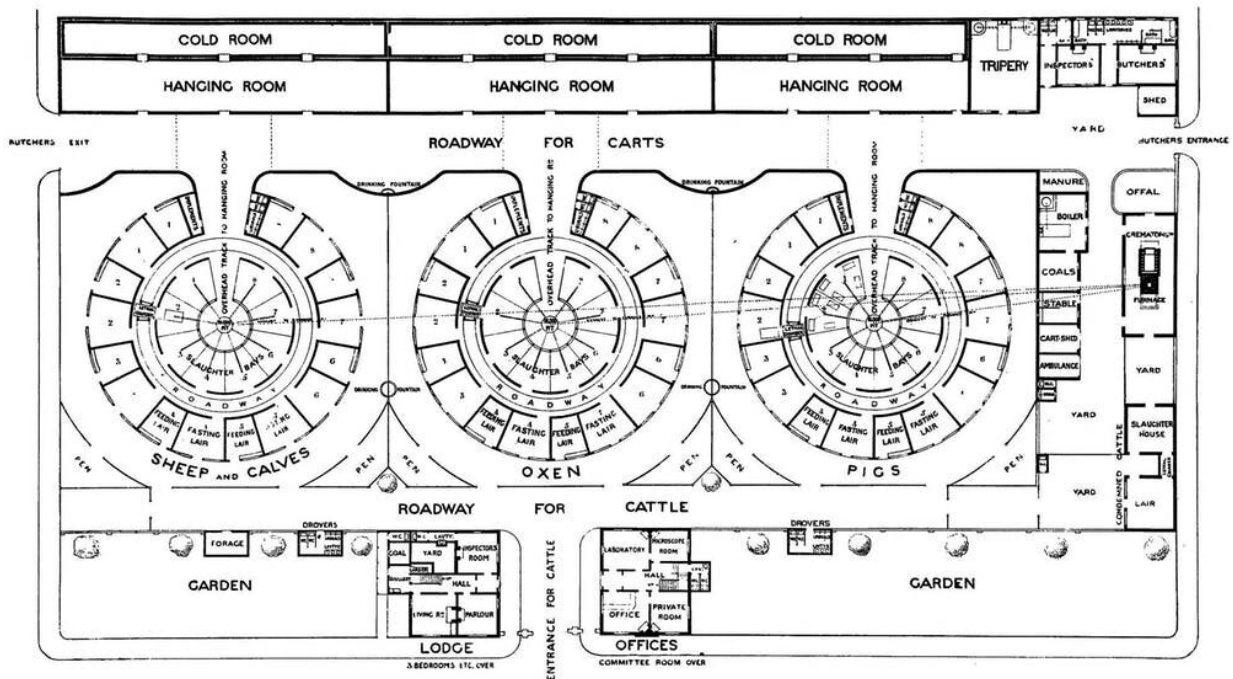
As a result of these innovations, products such as chilled and corned beef, frozen mutton and meat extracts including Bovril and Oxo became staples throughout British homes. Per capita meat consumption [increased dramatically](#), rising from about 87lb per year in the 1850s to 127lb annually by 1914, despite the fact that Britain's population nearly doubled in this period.

Cost was the major factor driving this change. When one can get a half-price leg of mutton from the other side of the globe, remarked one

prominent food writer, one sets aside "all sentimental considerations in favour of the roast beef of Old England".

Mass marketing campaigns alongside positive media coverage also helped promote these new forms of meat. Victorian commentators celebrated frozen meat's capacity to feed the "energetic, flesh-fed men" required to sustain British industry and imperialism. Meanwhile "beef tea" was widely advertised as a life enhancing force in Britain's fights against alcoholism, influenza, European rivals and imperial perils.

Meat remained a luxury for the very poor in Victorian Britain. But as the 19th century came to a close, and as more and more British consumers grew accustomed to imported beef and mutton, the idea of meat – the more the better – as an essential part of everyday meals became increasingly popular among working-class as well as middle-class meat-eaters.

As global meat markets revolutionised the dining habits of the British nation, they also changed the face of the planet. Vast tracts of American and Australasian land were reshaped as pasture that supported the British breeds of cattle and sheep that Britons preferred to eat. And selective breeding programmes meant the bodies of these animals fattened faster and could be stored more easily in refrigerated holds: animals were bred with their carcasses in mind.

Boiled babies

The globalisation of Victorian meat eating was revolutionary, then, but it was also highly controversial. Advocates of the canning and refrigeration industries championed their capacity to deliver healthy, wholesome, inexpensive and sustainable meat supplies from Britain's colonies and the "new world". But home-reared meat was seen to be of better quality and safer, especially early on in the development of these industries.

Many potential customers were put off by scandals involving putrefied meat, as well as scare stories surrounding the meat's origins. Metropolitan meat eaters feared that overseas farmers were feeding them offal or meat from diseased animals. In my archival research, I've even discovered concerns that boiled human babies were entering the food chain.

It wasn't just that the British were wary of eating long dead animals from far flung parts of the world. Overseas competition provoked demands to protect British agriculture, both to preserve traditional ways of life and to guarantee food security. Animal rights campaigners too were

concerned at the increasingly intensive farming methods and assembly line slaughter techniques associated with developing meat markets.

And at the same time, Britain's growing vegetarian movement was promoting the economic, health and ethical benefits of a meat free diet. Writing in the 1880s, the prominent vegetarian and socialist Henry Salt predicted that "future and wiser generations will look back on the habit of flesh-eating as a strange relic of ignorance and barbarism".

A new start

Salt would be horrified by a 21st-century world struggling to cope with an ever growing demand for cheap, plentiful meat. Horrified, but perhaps not entirely surprised. The unhealthy, unethical and unsustainable way that the "global meat complex" operates today is the greedy, brutal and environmentally devastating extension of what his meat eating contemporaries did to the world.

But this Victorian history can also help ongoing efforts to change the way our planet produces and consumes protein. First and foremost, it makes clear that there is nothing inevitable or "natural" about the way meat markets take shape. Hundreds of millions of people eat meat in the way and the quantities they do, not because they're inherently designed to do so, but because of a global system set in motion by British imperial power.

And we should keep in mind that this system's development was an incredibly controversial process, marked by fierce debates as well as dramatic dietary change. At a time of year when many of us are thinking about how to transform our lives for the better, the prospect of giving up meat, or of eating insects or lab-grown meat, provokes widespread scepticism, hostility and disgust. We'd all do well to remember, therefore, that not so long ago the prospect of eating frozen lamb from

the other side of the world provoked a similar range of reactions among the Victorian population.

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