

Ageing Better

In the nineteenth century ageing was often harsh, with class, gender and marital status playing significant roles in someone's quality of life.

Wealthier individuals, particularly men, were more likely to age better due to access to resources like healthcare and proper nutrition. Women, especially widows or those who were unmarried, faced economic and social vulnerability.

Today, ageing is generally more equitable, though disparities still exist. Improved healthcare, social mobility and evolving gender roles mean people, especially women, can age more independently and actively.

Being active is a great way to stay healthy whatever a person's age. Eating a healthy diet, keeping socially active with friends and family, and keeping our minds busy can help us live happier lives.

1. *Old Woman beside a Fire, 19th century* **Joséphine Bowes (1825-1874)**

Oil on canvas *J.VII*

At the time of painting, poverty and destitution were often viewed as personal rather than social failings. This is possibly an example of a 'bad' old age; with the suggestion that the black cat is this woman's only companion.

Old women living alone were often the targets of suspicion and labelled as 'witches' out of fear or prejudice. Old age still brings huge challenges relating to loneliness and isolation today. In the past this was compounded by no social care (other than falling on meagre parish relief) and for many, the harshness of life in the workhouse was the only solution.

2. *Portrait of a Lady of 81 years, 1805* **Jean-Louis Elshoecht (1760-1841)**

Oil on panel *B.M.856*

The Latin inscription reads 'her age is 81', a great age for a person born in the eighteenth century. The sitter is represented as a religious person, clutching a missal which she has been reading, and wearing a large cross around her neck and a simple wedding ring.

3. *Les Batons de Vieillesse (The Walking Sticks for the Old Age), 19th century* **François Louis Lanfant (1814-1892)**

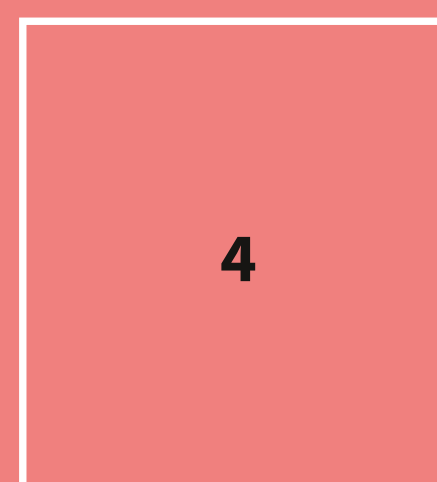
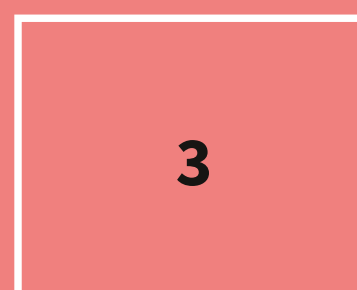
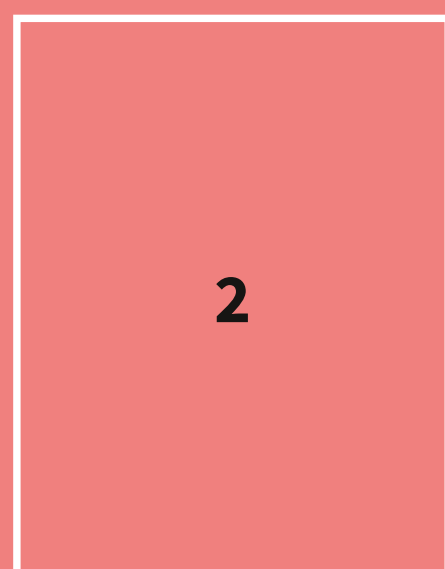
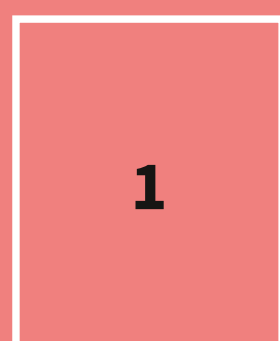
Oil on panel *B.M.717*

The grandmother's devotion to her family is rewarded with their assistance in her old age. The church spire in the background may be a reminder of the Christian aspect of their benevolent act.

4. *Head of a Woman, 19th century* **Artist Unknown**

Oil on canvas *B.M.511*

This sensitive portrait reflects the elderly woman's quiet and dignified repose. Her bonnet and hair is neat and tidy. Her far-away look suggests she is reflecting, on memories perhaps, accepting of her old age. Is this 'good' old age, as opposed to the more unsettling scene of the old woman and cat in the hovel?



Age UK provides support and advice, and campaigns for older people on issues such as benefits, care, health and wellbeing. More information can be found via ageuk.org.uk



The NHS, working with partners, has also produced a Healthy Ageing guide which can be accessed via england.nhs.uk/ourwork/clinical-policy/older-people/healthy-ageing-caring/