

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



This is one of a series of stories about those whose names appear in the Weston Park Servants' Database.

Alice Kavanagh WESTON PARK

The Weston Park database tells us Alice Kavanagh took the position of 4th housemaid in 1887¹. We know she worked there until 1891 when she is named as a Still Room Maid in the 1891 census². Clearly she had done well to gain a promotion, although this was also a junior position.

For more information about the Still Room, Mrs Beeton's views of the Still Room Maid and the key relationship to the Housekeeper please see the Few Forgotten Women Story of Georgina Meddings.

Alice Mary Kavanagh was born in Bangalore³, India on 4 Oct 1871 to William Harboure Kavanagh (b.1838 Dublin, Ireland) and his wife Sarah⁴. Sergeant Major William Kavanagh had married Sarah Sadler in Colchester, Essex on 19 Jun 1865. William was already a Sergeant when he married and soon after was posted to 'the East Indies', moving to Bangalore, India on 10 Sept 1865. Their first son William Thomas was born in India in 1867, as were Margaret Susan, Alice Mary, James and Herbert. The family had returned to

¹ D1287/20/1 Weston Wages Book, Stafford Record Office as listed in [Weston Park Database](#) (free registration needed)

² 1891: RG12/2097 folios 5-6

³ Bangalore, previously Mysore state was made part of Madras in 1861. Bangalore, is now Bengaluru, and is in Karnataka state.

⁴ India, Select Births and Baptisms 1786-1947 transcript accessed via Ancestry September 2025

Meriden near Coventry in Warwickshire, England by 1873 where George and later Edward completed the family⁵. William was pensioned on 4 December 1877⁶ but continued to serve in the Warwickshire Yeoman Cavalry. His original trade was as a weaver but later records show him as a tramp master and as a tax collector as well as receiving his army pension after 21 years of service.

It must have been quite a culture shock for the family, moving from a house with servants in Bangalore to the cold of England where the children were sent to school and then expected to go into service. When Alice was 10 years old her mother died and her father re-married four years later. We find Alice at the age of 16 as a 4th housemaid at Weston Park. It is likely she will have had some experience, perhaps in a neighbour or relative's household prior to this. She soon progressed and we find her in the 1891 census working as a still room maid at Weston Park. I wonder if it was her family knowledge of spices that brought her into the still room. The English interest in pickles and chutneys, including piccalilli was brought home by employees of the British East India Company.

It seems particularly appropriate for pickles to be made in the still room since the distilling of alcohol and perfumes gave the room its name and vinegars result from alcohol exposed to air. Pickling in various vinegars was common, used for eggs (hens tend not to lay so well over winter), various nuts, mushrooms, fruit such as damsons and vegetables including cauliflower, cucumber and green pepper. These were stored in stoneware or glassware as the acetic acid in vinegar made the lead leach out of earthenware, poisoning the contents. The still room maid would have learnt which items needed cooking before pickling, and which needed to be salted to remove excess liquid which would dilute and render ineffective the preservative quality of the vinegar.

It would be interesting to visit Weston Park and look at any kitchen equipment which Alice might have used. A big house like Weston Park would make large quantities of foods. I wonder what sort of weights were used. Large iron weights were likely used for the biggest measures. More moderate kitchen weights may have been made of pottery, Wedgewood for

⁵ England Census 1881 Class: RG11; Piece: 3055; Folio: 65; Page: 4; GSU roll: 1341729 accessed via Ancestry September 2025

⁶ Chelsea Pensioners British Army Service Records 1760-1913 WO97/1741/201 William Kavanagh joined the City of Dublin Artillery Regiment of Militia on 9 Aug 1855. He transferred to 16th Queen's Lancers on 30 January 1856, promoted Corporal 23 Sept 1861, sergeant 19 May 1864, Sergeant major 4 January 1866 and Regimental Sergeant Major 6 Nov 1867 until 14 Dec 1873. He gained 5 good conduct badges (maximum). Pension date 4 Dec 1877. He joined the Warwickshire Yeoman Cavalry from 26 Mar 1877 to 31 January 1894 when they reduced their numbers. Accessed via FindMyPast September 2025

example made these. Pottery weights were made illegal for sales purposes in 1907 because they were easily chipped, plus there was an adjusting hole into which lead could be added to ensure the correct weight - easy to tamper with!

Spices might have been weighed using Apothecaries weights, more often made of metal, cylindrical with long necks to make them easier to handle. British measures were based on grains of wheat. Apothecaries ounces (480 grains weight) were divided into 8 drachms (60 grains each) and each drachm divided into 3 scruples (20 grains).⁷ A certain level of mathematics was therefore needed by still room workers. Liquids may have been measured in pewter jugs, stoneware, pottery or glass measuring jugs. All would have been available in 1880s. Whoa betide the maid who dropped and broke one! Spoons could also be used to measure herbs and spices.

The household would have owned a whole range of cutlery. For example specialist spoons which a still room maid would need to become familiar with as she would have been involved in preparing and possibly serving afternoon tea. She would recognise mustard and salt spoons, tiny snuff spoons, tea caddy spoons, ornate teaspoons for serving high tea to the gentry, sugar spoons, silver egg spoons (which quickly tarnished and would have needed the most frequent cleaning) to name but a few. A household such as this would no doubt have been keen to demonstrate the latest fashions. Round bowled soup spoons were not introduced until the end of the 19th century. 'Albany' pattern for spoons for example was introduced in the 1880s, and from 1890 art nouveau designs came in.⁸

Refridgerators or even electricity were not yet available. Fresh foods therefore needed to be carefully stored, and even then would only last a few days in general. Meat would need to be kept free of flies and other insects, and well out of the reach of rodents. Nineteenth century meat safes were typically made from perforated zinc panels or wire gauze. A big house would have had special larder areas. Game needed to be hung to mature before eating. Game hooks, arranged in circles on iron hoops called 'dutch crowns' were common in such large houses. Most meat would be cooked in the kitchen but cold cuts for sandwiches, and meat pastes or terrines might be prepared in the still room. Home baked bread may also have been hung from the ceiling, well away from mice, in large wooden frames (bread flakes or creels) though earthenware crocks or bread bins made of tinsplate or enamel were also available. Salt was stored in earthenware salt jars or wooden salt boxes with lids attached

⁷ J.T.Graham Weights and Measures Shire Album 44

⁸ Simon Moore Spoons 1650-1930 Shire Album 211

by leather strips. Tinplate canisters perhaps housed flour, tea and sugar. Spices may have been kept in small wooden chests of drawers or perhaps wooden canisters. A wide range of kitchen implements would have been available. Breadcrumbs, which had many uses, would be made using a grater. A much smaller grater would have been used in the still room to grate nutmeg.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 had opened the way for development and advertising of many new kitchen gadgets, sausage making machines and many labour saving mincers and choppers. By the late 19th century small hand cranked ice-cream makers were available, the resulting delicacy being shaped perhaps in pewter moulds. From the 1880s pressed glass jelly moulds were available. Surely such items would have been used in Weston Park when Alice was there.

The still room would have had varying sizes of mortar and pestle for grinding sugar and spices. These may have been bronze or brass, iron, wood or marble.

“Mrs Beeton’s Shilling Cookery Book of the 1880s recommends a Wedgewood mortar and pestle costing three shillings and ninepence for the smallest (the author might well have said poorest) homes, as against the expenditure of fifteen shillings for a marble mortar ‘suitable for any mansion’.”⁹

Although Isabella Beeton herself had died in 1865 of puerperal fever aged 28 after the birth of her 4th child, Isabella’s column on ‘Cooking, Pickling and Preserving’ in the *Englishwoman’s Domestic* magazine with the subsequent books are still available. These may well have been used in still rooms across the country as the basis of many tried and tested recipes.¹⁰ The still room book of recipes and remedies would be adjusted by the household to their particular produce and used by a succession of cooks and still room servants.

Seasonal fruits and vegetables would have been brought in by the gardeners from the walled kitchen garden and elsewhere on the estate. A good relationship with the gardeners was key, to know which produce was coming into season and to give requests in good time for the gardeners to harvest and bring the required items. The still room would have taken excess produce to preserve, and would need to order the necessary vinegars, sugars and other ingredients in good time.

⁹ David J. Eveleigh *Old Cooking Utensils Shire Album* 177

¹⁰ Nicola Humble *Culinary Pleasures Cookbooks and the Transformation of British Food* Faber & Faber 2005

Apples could just be laid in a cool dry place, and reviewed regularly, but most other fruits would be bottled or made into jams and jellies. Bottling jars may have had corks or melted wax to seal them, but they likely had a good supply of robust Kilner and Mason jars which were introduced in 1858 with fitted metal clips, rubber rings to form the seal and screw tops ensuring the contents were airtight. A large copper preserving pan was best for jam making, and was often highly prized, polished and put on display (perhaps partly due to its size and finding space to store it elsewhere). Many cooking pans were lined with tin but preserving pans were not as the boiling point of sugar was too close to the melting point of tin. Cheaper enamel pans were avoided as they tended to let jams boil over. A large house would have had specialist pans for many items, some with semi circular handles to hang them over the fire, others with long side handles to avoid the cook being burnt. Oval frying pans for fish, small pans for omelettes and so on. Open fire cooking and roasting though was in decline, even in modest households by 1900, as gas and electric cookers came in.

In jam making a skilful cook knew which fruits would reach setting point when boiled with sugar and those which, like strawberries, peaches and apricots, would need an additional setting agent (pectin) from another ingredient such as quince or the white rind of citrus fruits. Sugar's preserving qualities could be used in many different ways. Flowers could be crystallised for example violets which were used to flavour as well as decorate sweet treats. Elderflowers could be made into a cordial and citrus fruits used in drinks or for flavouring. Hedgerow fruits in season would be collected and preserved perhaps as wines, jelly to have with game, bottled in syrup or dried - elderberries, blackberries, wild crab apples, rowan and bilberries helping to provide a variety of flavours over the long winter months.

Herbs and flowers would be dried by the still room maids. Herbal teas and waters such as rose water and perhaps orange water would be made as well as oils, candles and perfumes for use within and by the household. Many great houses also had ice houses. Primarily used for storing ice, some used this for preservation of food. Ice would have been used by the still room to present foods at a range of temperatures to their guests.¹¹

The Great Exhibition of 1851 brought many exotic items to everyone's attention. Canned food had been available to the luxury market through outlets such as Fortnum and Mason before the 1850s but took a long while to become accepted. By the 1880s processing had

¹¹ Sue Shephard Pickled, Potted and Canned The Story of Food Preserving

improved so it was no longer the over-cooked tasteless produce of the early years. Canned fruit and tinned meat for example were becoming widely available.

Working directly for the Housekeeper, a presentable senior still room maid may have been allowed not only to prepare the cakes and sandwiches and treats but also to serve the afternoon tea. Many still room maids were ambitious and working under the cook but in direct line to the housekeeper they learned many skills to enable them to become a good housekeeper and cook for their own family or in service elsewhere.

The following table gives some idea of the still room maid's salary over time. All information taken from the Weston Park Database. At some times there were 2nd or even 3rd still room maids, and one 'Head Still Room Maid'. A more complete table follows as an appendix including more names and extra details.

Alice was appointed in 1887 as 4th housemaid and paid a salary of £10 per annum (PA). In 1888 this was raised to £12 PA. Unfortunately we do not know how much she was paid as still room maid (SRM). We know there have been SRMs at Weston Park from 1770 to 1940, although there are some apparent gaps. The salary would be dependent on age and experience as well as how efficient and effective the servant was. Perhaps also how involved the mistress of the house or housekeeper or cook were in the still room activities. Comparing to a cook's salary - Annie Douthwaite earned £35 as kitchen maid 1881 and £70 as Cook 1891. Clara Hill was promoted to cook and earned £60 PA as cook in 1893.

Little further is known of Alice. On the census night of 1901 we find her in her father's household with no stated occupation. By the census of 1911 her father is again a widower, and Alice is the housekeeper for him and two other adults. Her father died in January 1916, when the probate¹² helpfully shows Alice is still a spinster and the executor of his will (Effects £285 12s 10d which is the equivalent of over £20,000 today¹³). There was a bann for marriage recorded in Meriden in February 1916 and she married Harry Harper in April 1916.

The story will be updated if more information becomes apparent.

¹² England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858-1995. 12 Feb 1916 Birmingham accessed via Ancestry September 2025

¹³ <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>

Still Room Workers and their salaries

Start date	End Date	Surname	Given Name	Salary	
1795	1797	Newton	Harriet	5 guineas P.A. plus board wage £3	SRM
1811	1814	Pepperall	Mary	£9 9s PA plus 9s per week board wage	SRM
1823	1824	Peak	Mary	£9 9s PA	SRM
1835	1839	White	Sarah	£8 PA increased to £10 PA	SRM
1840	1844	Owen	Sarah	£10 PA	SRM
1878	1880	Milner	Annie	£20 PA	SRM
1881	1883	Hope	Elizabeth	£10 - £16 PA	SRM
1883	1887	Saunders	Mary	£20 - £22 PA	SRM
1887	1891	Kavanagh	Alice	£10 PA 1887, £12 PA 1888	4th housemaid /SRM
1887	1895	Thompson	Lydia	£20 - £25 PA	SRM
1890	1891	Hughes	Mary	£20 PA	SRM
1912	1913	Tinkler	Sarah	£22 PA insurance **	SRM
1913	1915	Askew	Ellen	£22 PA to £25 PA**	SRM
1919	1919	Taylor	M	£36 PA	SRM
1921	1924	Griffiths	Bessie	£40 PA	SRM
1924	1925	Howard	Molly	£30 PA - £35 PA	SRM
1925	1926	Cooper	Irene	£30 PA	SRM
1926	1927	Beddows	Ruth	£30 PA	SRM
1927	1929	Houghton	Winnie	£40 PA -£46 PA	SRM
1936	1937	Price or Pryce	Lilian	£48 - £55 PA	SRM
1938	1939	Forrester	Beryl	£40 PA	Head SRM

Start date	End Date	Surname	Given Name	Salary	
1939	1940	Moran	Catherine	£55 PA	SRM
1940	1941	Evans	Irene	£45 - £55 PA	SRM

**Those appointed in 1912-13 had £3-3s deducted each quarter for insurance. A substantial proportion of their income.

Appendix - Still Room Maids in the Weston Park Database

Start date	End Date	Surname	Given Name	Salary		Notes
1770		Brewer	Mary		SRM	
1795	1797	Newton	Harriet	5 guineas P.A. plus board wage £3 1797	SRM	Cottage maid, initially salary 3 guineas.
1811	1814	Pepperall	Mary	£9 9s PA plus 9s per week board wage	SRM	
1823	1824	Peak	Mary	£9 9s PA	SRM	Database birth date doesn't tally.
1825	1825	Williams	Sarah			
1835	1839	White	Sarah	£8 - £10 PA	SRM	
1839		Slagg	Sarah		SRM	
1840	1844	Owen	Sarah	£10 PA	SRM	b.1822
1840		Sheams	Mary		SRM	
1850		Cheadle	Lucy			Lived at Keeper's Lodge as Father was Gamekeeper
1871		Meddings	Georgina		SRM	*See her story.
1871		Shelton	Ann		SRM	1871 census, aged 31y Senior SRM

Start date	End Date	Surname	Given Name	Salary		Notes
1878		Easthop	Rose	£10	2nd SRM	
1878	1880	Milner	Annie	£20 PA	SRM	
1879	1880	Richardson	Elizabeth		2nd SRM	
1881	1883	Hope	Elizabeth	£10 PA 1881 £12 PA 1882 £16 PA 1883	SRM	
1881	1882	Stone	Ruth		SRM	
1883	1887	Saunders	Mary	£20 PA 1883 £22 PA 1886	SRM	
1884	1885	Atkins	Sarah Ann		2nd SRM	
1885	1888	Mason	Elizabeth	£12 PA	3rd/2nd SRM	2nd SRM from 1885
1887	1891	Kavanagh	Alice	£10 PA £12 PA 1888	4TH housemaid /SRM	No dates re change of role
1887	1895	Thompson	Lydia	£20 PA 1887 £22 PA 1891 £25 PA 1893	SRM	Service break 25/4/90 until 28/9/1891
1890	1891	Hughes	Mary	£20 PA	SRM	**Mary could be the Jane found in the census 1891??
1891		Hughes	Jane		SRM	**1891 Census B. Hawarden, Cheshire
1891	1893	Morris	Mary	£12 PA 1891 £14 PA 1893	2nd SRM	
1893	1895	Deller	Annie	£12	2nd SRM - SRM	No comment re increase salary
1901		Martin	Ellen		SRM	On 1901 census
1912	1913	Tinkler	Sarah	£22 PA insurance deducted £3-3s per quarter	SRM	LEft July 2nd
1913	1915	Askew	Ellen	£22 PA increased to £25 PA Insurance deducted £3 3s per quarter	SRM	
1919	1919	Taylor	M	£36 PA 1919	SRM	Joined 27th Sept

Start date	End Date	Surname	Given Name	Salary		Notes
1921	1924	Griffiths	Bessie	£40 PA 1941	SRM	Dairy maid from 10 May 1920. 1941 became SRM
1924	1925	Howard	Molly	£30 PA £35 PA from Dec 1924	SRM	Started 15 May - 17th Jan
1925	1926	Cooper	Irene	£30 PA	SRM	22 April - 21 Aug
1926	1927	Beddows	Ruth	£30 PA	SRM	23 Oct - 6 Aug
1927	1929	Houghton	Winnie	£40 PA £44 from Oct 1929 £46 PA from 1930	SRM	27th Aug 1927 - >Sept 1930
1936	1937	Price or Pryce	Lilian	£48 1936 £50 Jan 1937 £55 Mar 1937	SRM	
1937		Ponting	Olive	£18 PA Feb 1937 £20 PA Oct 1937	2nd SRM	
1938	1938	Thompson	Edna	£18 PA increased to £24 1st Sept.	2nd SRM	Arrived 8 Feb, left Sept.
1938	1939	Forrester	Beryl	£40 PA	Head SRM	25 Aug - 21 Oct
1939	1940	Moran	Catherine	£55 PA	SRM	22 Dec - 1 Mar only
1940	1941	Evans	Irene	£45 to £55 Nov 1940	SRM	1st March - April