

This is A Few Forgotten Women Story



Domestic Servants

There have always been those who led and those who were told what to do; owners/employers and servants, simply due to the nature of the structure of society. Gender then further dictates male/female ranking. From Medieval times coverture dominated the married women's station in life, being "under the cover" of her husband, owning nothing, with no legal standing. This, despite not applying directly to single or widowed women, still influenced how they were treated. Women were inferior, their work less valued, if they were to have work at all. However, the Industrial Revolution changed society and the economic life of family and work was reshaped, whilst still retaining the gender stereotypes in place.

Servants were still needed, even more so, for the increasing, new class of the industrial rich needed to be "looked after". It was conjectured that the changing social situation could bring about conflict, which led to several pieces of legislation regarding the master/servant relationship. The Master and Servants' Acts 1823 were designed to "better regulations of servants, labourers and work people", being biased towards the employers. It required obedience from servants to their contracted employers, infringement punished by the courts, with possible goal and hard labour.

More women needed to work, to support family finances, a larger number of women were employed, their labour being less expensive than men. Therefore more working class women were employed in the more menial tasks. Their educational opportunities were limited, not geared to developing careers or leading to self-fulfilment, but in the majority of cases, if they had any education at all, it centred round training to run the family home. This in turn fitted them, with some extra instruction, to work as servants in the homes of those in a more affluent position.¹

*Wanted, Kitchenmaid, age 18; excellent opportunity
to learn, under first-class cook: excellent situation.*

Apply Mrs Brittain 85 Washington Road.

Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 25th July, 1893

It was therefore with the coming of the late 18th and early 19th centuries that the numbers of servants rose to about 1.6 million in 1891, particularly the number of female servants. From the censuses, girls from the tender age of 10, were recorded as servants. Looking at the households of some of these servants, the households were obviously, poor, with large families in 2 up 2 down houses, how could they afford servants? These girls were likely to be the daughters of relatives, friends or neighbours who were helping out with young children enabling both their own, and the households' wives, to go to work.

¹ Clarke, Kate *Women and Domestic Service in Victorian Society* The History Press 2015
<https://thehistorypress.co.uk/article/women-and-domestic-service-in-victorian-society/>.

Day Girl, respectable. Wanted, 15-16, help with light housework. Apply after six o'clock. Mrs Hague, 20 Langdale road, Millhouses.

Sheffield Independent, 25th July 1924

The next rung of the ladder was for a young woman to gain employment in the household of local businessmen.

Wanted, a good General Servant; must understand plain cooking; two in family. Apply to Miss Cook, Norfolk House, Spa, Gloucester

Gloucester Citizen, 9th April 1889

They would have more responsibility and need to learn to be more respectful of their employers. This then led to be “the maid of all work”. A description can be found at <https://janeaustensworld.com/2009/06/14/regency-servants-maid-of-all-work/>.

More affluent households would employ more servants, but “the housemaid was the foot-soldier in the Victorian household’s constant war against grime.”² The fewer servants, the more tasks they were expected to carry out.³ When it came to the larger houses even though some of the tasks were very lowly, a fourth housemaid for example, the girls employed would have to have more experience, therefore they would be older, (this can be seen at Weston

² Aslet, Clive *The English House* Bloomsbury 2009.

³ Sambrook, Pamela *What was Life like as a Victorian Servant?* History Extra 2019 www.historyextra.com/period/victorian/real-downton-abbey-19th-century-servants-life-upstairs-downstairs-maid-butler/.

Park). In the early years of the 19th century when travelling for the working class was more difficult, girls would, in many cases, remain in the locality but as the century advanced and transport by train and communication, via newspapers became more prevalent, women could move to different parts of the country gaining advancement and better positions.

Wanted Good cook, about 30. Preference given to one who has had experience as a kitchen maid. Country house, about five miles from Bristol, near a railway station. Apply by letter, Box 100, General Post Office, Bristol.

Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette, 28th May 1896

Advertisements in newspapers would alert eagle eyed young women to jobs where they could advance their careers.⁴

Wanted cook, two housemaids, parlourmaid, children's maid, young housemaid and general servant to assist. Wages varying from £14 to £30. Country servants liked. For particulars send stamped addressed envelope to Mrs Pipe, 82 Bishop's Road, Westbourne Grove, London.

Thetford Watton Times, 7th August 1880

Word of mouth by respected employers would count for a great deal when a young woman wanted to move on.

⁴Higgs, Michelle *Hiring the Help* Discover your Ancestors Magazine Issue 4 2015
www.thegenealogist.co.uk/featuredarticles/discover-your-ancestors/bookazine/4/hiring-the-help-7415/.

A Lady wishes to Recommend a young person as Upper Housemaid and sewing maid in Gentleman's family; under housemaid kept; wages £20 all found. Address H.C. Grove Lodge, Shelton, Hanley.

Daily London News, 28th February 1880

Agency adverts in the newspapers were a helpful source of information about employment in different parts of the country.

Waldron's Servants' Agency and Governesses' Institute, 14 York Street, Bath. No fee to servants until engaged. Stamped envelope for reply. Good Cooks, Useful Maids, Nurses, Head, Under and Single-handed Parlourmaids, Head, Under and Single-handed Housemaids, Head and Under Laundrymaids, Cook Generals, Kitchen Maids, Scullery Maids, Between Maids, Generals, Valet, Attendant, Butlers (aged 48-60), Footmen, Married Couple, Groom-Gardeners, good Generals (aged 23-30 £22 to £28). Hotels: Housekeeper, Cooks, Kitchenmaids, Waitresses, Chambermaids, Housemaids, Staffmaids, Pantrymaids.

Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette, 27th January 1917

The closer they were to the master and mistress of the house, the greater the opportunity to move around the country with them.

Children's Maid (good needlewoman), required at once; Experienced Lady's Maid (to travel); Usefull Maid (good nurse and needlewoman) about 35; Useful Maid (willing to assist in household duties).....

South Eastern Advertiser, 24th January 1885

There were many categories of servant. There was also a social divide just as in the outside world.⁵ All servants with the same title would not necessarily keep the same hours.⁶ The tasks that the different jobs entailed were often laid down in books such as Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management.⁷

Life in a country house would be lived at a different pace to life in the big cities and spas such as Bath or London. Each household would have its own routine.⁸

A member of the household who often fell between the household divide was the governess. She had a unique position, with her intimate connection to the

⁵ Wallis, Lucy *Servants a Life Below Stairs* BBC News 2012 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-19544309>. Turansky Carrie *Edwardian Servants Part 1* Carrie Turansky 2014 <https://carrieturansky.com/edwardian-servantpart-one/>. The Victorian Christmas Lady *The Victorian Servant* The Victorian Christmas Lady 2023 <https://victorianchristmaslady.com/the-victorian-servant/?v=7885444af42e>.

⁶ The Manor House *Edwardian Life a Typical day in the House* The Manor House 2003 www.pbs.org/manorhouse/edwardianlife/typical_day.html#top.

⁷ Beeton, Mrs Isabella *The Book of Household Management* S.O. Beeton (1861) <https://archive.org/details/b20392758/page/n3/mode/2up>.

⁸ Allingham, Merryn *Country House Living a Servants' Life* <https://merrynallingham.com/20th-century/country-house-living-a-servants-life/>. Holland, *The Duties of the Cook and the Parlourmaid* Edwardian Promenade 2012 www.edwardianpromenade.com/servants-2/the-duties-of-the-cook-and-the-parlourmaid/. Victorian London *The Housemaid, her Duties and how to Perform them* Houlston and Sons c. 1870. www.victorianlondon.org/publications/housemaid.htm. Bellis, Catriona *A Day in the Life of a Servant* National Trust for Scotland 2021 www.nts.org.uk/stories/a-day-in-the-life-of-a-servant.

family, without actually being a member of the family but she was often regarded, or regarded herself, as better than the other servants.⁹

Every servant's experience would be different according to the household in which they lived. It would also depend on the strictness of the servants who held the highest positions. Rules would vary between establishments also, when they could have time off, who they could fraternize with, if they could get married. In some households servants were not allowed to marry and if they did, would have to leave their posts. Life as a servant, at whatever level, was hard, working long hours and frequently running up and down many stairs during the day. They were meant to carry out their set tasks but still remain invisible.

There are numerous books and websites by servants, about servants, their lives, tasks and the places in which they lived. The following list is just a selection.

Adams, Samuel and Adams, Sarah *The Complete Servant* Knight and Lacey 1825
www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/69487.

Allingham, Merryn *Country House Living a Servants' Life*
<https://merrynallingham.com/20th-century/country-house-living-a-servants-life/>.

⁹ Matthew, Mimi *The Vulnerable Victorian Governess* Mimi Matthews 2018
www.mimimathews.com/2018/02/12/the-vulnerable-victorian-governess/
Day, Felicity *Governesses: Who were they, and what were their lives like?* Who do you Think you are? Magazine 2023
www.whodoyouthinkyouaremagazine.com/feature/governesses
Marten, Rod *A Victorian Governess' Story* Family Tree Magazine undated
www.family-tree.co.uk/how-to-guides/a-victorian-governesss-story/

Anon. *The Servant's Guide and Family Manuel* John Limbird 2nd edition 1831
<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=4wldAAAAYAAJ&pg=GBS.PR13&hl=en>.

Beeton, Mrs Isabella *The Book of Household Management* S.O. Beeton (1861)
<https://archive.org/details/b20392758/page/n3/mode/2up>.

Bellis, Catriona *A Day in the Life of a Servant* National Trust for Scotland 2021
www.nts.org.uk/stories/a-day-in-the-life-of-a-servant.

Clarke, Kate *Women and Domestic Service in Victorian Society* The History Press 2015 <https://thehistorypress.co.uk/article/women-and-domestic-service-in-victorian-society/>.

Day, Felicity *Governesses: Who were they, and what were their lives like?* Who do you Think you are? Magazine 2023.

www.whodoyouthinkyouaremagazine.com/feature/governesses

Evans, Sian *Life Below Stairs in the Victorian and Edwardian Country House* Collins 2015.

Higgs, Michelle *Hiring the Help* Discover your Ancestors Magazine Issue 4 2015
www.thegenealogist.co.uk/featuredarticles/discover-your-ancestors/bookazine/4/hiring-the-help-7415/.

Holland, *The Duties of the Cook and the Parlourmaid* Edwardian Promenade 2012 www.edwardianpromenade.com/servants-2/the-duties-of-the-cook-and-the-parlourmaid/ .

Horn, Pamela *Life in the Victorian Household* Sutton Publications 2007.

Horn, Pamela *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* Sutton Publications 2004.

Maloney, Alison *Life Below Stairs: True Lives of Edwardian Servants* Michael O'Mara 2011.

The Manor House *Edwardian Life a Typical day in the House* The Manor House
2003 www.pbs.org/manorhouse/edwardianlife/typical_day.html#top.

Marten, Rod *A Victorian Governess' Story* Family Tree Magazine undated
www.family-tree.co.uk/how-to-guides/a-victorian-governesss-story/.

Matthew, Mimi *The Vulnerable Victorian Governess* Mimi Matthews 2018
www.mimimatthews.com/2018/02/12/the-vulnerable-victorian-governess/.

Sambrook, Pamela A. *The Countryhouse Servant* Sutton Publications 1999.

Sambrook, Pamela *What was Life like as a Victorian Servant?* History Extra
2019 www.historyextra.com/period/victorian/real-downton-abbey-19th-century-servants-life-upstairs-downstairs-maid-butler/.

Stanley, Liz [ed.] *The Diaries of Hannah Cullwick, Victorian Maidservant* Little
Brown 1984.

Ticknell Life www.ticknallife.co.uk/servants This website has several articles
regarding different ranks of servants and their life on the country estate.

Turansky Carrie *Edwardian Servants Part 1* Carrie Turansky 2014
<https://carrieturansky.com/edwardian-servantpart-one/>.

The Victorian Christmas Lady *The Victorian Servant* The Victorian Christmas
Lady 2023 <https://victorianchristmaslady.com/the-victorian-servent/?v=7885444af42e>.

Victorian London *The Housemaid, her Duties and how to Perform them*
Houlston and Sons c. 1870
www.victorianlondon.org/publications/housemaid.htm.

Wallis, Lucy *Servants a Life Below Stairs* BBC News 2012
www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-19544309.

Williams, Annie *A Detested Occupation: A History of Domestic Servants in
North Wales, 1800-1930* Gwasg Carreg Gwalch 2016.

Woolley, Hannah *The Compleat Servant-maid: or the young maiden's and family's daily companion* 9th edition London 1719 - available in facsimile form.

Fiction: Goodwin, Nathan Dylan *The Lost Ancestor* 2014.

Ann Simcock © 2025 (sites accessed 13th August 2025)