

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Nick Sign, Servants in Suffolk Country Houses 1750-1900

Nick Sign explored different aspects of the life of a servant in a Suffolk country house between 1750 and 1900 when he spoke to the April meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall.

The upper classes were very dependent on their servants. The butler tended to manage the male servants but the housekeeper directed the females, except for the kitchen staff who were the responsibility of the cook. Servants had a rigid hierarchy. Junior servants were expected to defer to their seniors. For example, the housekeeper was always referred to as 'Mrs,' irrespective of her marital status. Her authority was shown by the large bunch of keys that she was likely to carry.

Servants undertook a range of tasks within the house. Their working day began at dawn and finished at about 11pm. Holidays were unknown. The butler managed the footmen and valets who served meals and catered for the needs of the male members of the family. In addition, gamekeepers, gardeners, grooms and coachmen worked in the grounds of the house.

Female servants often had to undertake hard physical tasks. A lady's maid would care for her mistress, but the housemaids would carry coal to the many fires around the house and undertake the cleaning. Women employed in the laundry had a hot, wet, and smelly job. Kitchen staff had to ensure that the stoves were blacked and pots sparkling, as well as producing meals for the family.

There was a preference to employ servants from agricultural areas as they were thought to be more 'tractable.' Families often encouraged girls to go into service as it was respectable employment. Some women advertised their availability for posts such as companions in newspapers like *The Times*. There were also agencies offering servants and hiring fairs existed in some areas into the late 19th Century.

All servants were lowly paid. Accounts for Ickworth House in 1853 show the butler received £85 per annum. The groom earned £70 with a valet getting £26. The wages for women were lower. The housekeeper was given £30 for the year with a maid being paid £14. There could be perquisites, such as meals and accommodation, but there was always the fear of what would happen when the servant became too old to work. Many ended in the workhouse.

There were strict controls on servants. The invention of a bell system to call for service meant that staff were often not seen. Romances were not allowed with other servants. In Palladian houses, the ground floor was the workplace for servants and they often slept in the attic. However, in the later neo-classical houses, conditions deteriorated for servants as the family occupied the ground floor so that they could access the garden. Consequently, servants worked and often slept in the basement, deprived of natural light. The houses too could have problems of dampness, vermin and poor sanitation 'below stairs.' However, after the First World War, conditions tended to improve for servants as there were other sources of employment, especially for women in offices and shops. Employers had to offer more if they were to attract and retain staff.

Servant life did offer some security while they worked. They had food and accommodation, along with some other benefits. They could gain some social status but there was a loss of personal freedoms and a passive temperament was required to cope with the life.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 27 May at The Village Hall, Rickinghall IP221HD when David Eddershaw will give a talk about Pakenham Watermill. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy