

## Domestic Servants

Paterson, Michael. *Life in Victorian Britain: A Social History of Queen Victoria's Reign*. Running Press, 2008.

In a wealthy age in which the property-owning classes were expanding, there was a constant need for servants (it was estimated that a third of the population of London was made up of servants, though in other towns this would have been less). They worked both indoors and outside. In large households there would be a hierarchy, reaching from the butler at the top through the footmen to the 'boots' -- a boy, doubtless destined to be a footman once he was big enough to fit a livery, who cleaned the shoes. Among the women the housekeeper was at the top, with below her a cook and a range of ladies' maids, chamber-maids and kitchen maids. Outside there would be a head gardener and a number of helpers, varying in expertise down

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to young boys who gave general assistance. The keeping of a carriage would require further staff-- a coachman and at least one groom. Naturally, comparatively few households could run to this number of servants (though the 1881 census shows a moderately wealthy Kent doctor to have had a 'page' as well as a maid. The young man's job would have been to run errands.). It was more common, further down the social scale, to have only a maid, and even the most modest lower-middle-class household would usually have a single servant-- a young girl of thirteen or so from the local board school or work-house. Such labour was very cheap, and at a time when domestic appliances were still expensive it would have been extremely difficult to run a home without it.

Most servants began this life in their early teens. Those who worked in cities frequently came from the country, having been recommended or found places through a network of acquaintances or previous employers. In larger households they might be more or less anonymous, their names unknown to their employers. In smaller establishments they could well be treated as one of the family, confided in or trusted with money for shopping. The hours they worked were usually long, for they had to be up very early to light the stove, heat water and prepare breakfast. They could not go to bed until the day's work was over, which might mean clearing up after a dinner-party in the small hours of the following day. They lived in whatever accommodation was available-- typically they occupied small bedrooms on the top floor of a house and took their meals in the basement kitchen, the bottom floor being regarded as their domain. They would usually have only one afternoon off each week, and therefore had little opportunity to explore their surroundings or increase their circle of friends. Females were often recruited on the understanding that they had 'no followers', and if a servant married she

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would be expected to leave. Otherwise, domestics could spend decades-- their entire working lives-- with the same employer. In the best instances, being a servant in such a household gave men and women a sense of belonging to a close-knit, family-like group. It could provide security, shelter and enough to eat until they were too old to continue. Once they reached that age, it was possible that their grateful employers would make provision for them.

The stereotypical image of Victorian servants is of dumbly obedient, resigned men and women, loyal enough to their masters to spend years in menial work. The reality was less straightforward. Good servants were extremely difficult to find, and would-be employers often despaired of the applicants they interviewed. Their domestics were frequently lazy or insolent. Middle-class books and periodicals-- *Punch* is, as ever, an invaluable reflection of this-- lament their

propensity to pilfer, to break ornaments, to dawdle on errands, to help themselves to the wine-cellar and to mock their betters. It was so difficult to find good ones that often a certain amount of leeway had to be granted in order not to lose them. Servants did not necessarily feel any loyalty to a household, and might leave at very short notice if offered better prospects elsewhere. They might also flounce out if they took offence at the hours or the tasks expected of them. Cooks were notorious for this, for they knew they could blackmail their mistress by threatening to leave just before a dinner-party.