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Regency Daily Life

Daily life at a regency house party would have been rigidly ordered by etiquette and protocol. And in almost every detail, there was one rule for the men and quite another for the women.

A gentleman's day would have been filled with manly pursuits: hunting, shooting or fishing if during the season, or perhaps 'Skill at Arms', sport training or philanthropy on his estate.

Meanwhile, a lady would be expected to embrace boredom. An increased separation between the workings of house and estate and the landed gentry meant that women were increasingly left without a role. Boredom was a luxury indeed, as while a lady would write letters or paint, the agricultural workers on her estate would rise at dawn and work until sunset for a wage that had halved over the past 5 years.

The display of manners in this period was crucial to social interaction. Ill-judged behaviour at this time could be a positive health risk as although illegal, duels were still a common occurrence.

Breakfast

An early breakfast was a male affair. Occurring before 10am, the meal consisted of tea, bread, butter and perhaps coffee and chocolate. In some households, breakfast might be a continuation of the night before with alcohol being served.

Meanwhile, the women were likely to stay in their rooms and eat on their own, perhaps taking some breakfast together later in the morning. Moderation was advised with advice books of the day warning women to avoid gorging themselves on bread and chocolate.

Morning Exercise

From approximately 10am onwards guests spent a leisurely morning: men might hunt, fish or walk and women would take some fresh air (but never at midday when the sun is at its strongest, or in the early evening when there is dew. Always with a bonnet or veil to protect their complexions). The independent spirit of Austen's most feisty heroines is marked out by their love of long walks without hats on. Elizabeth Bennet even committed the ultimate crime of running around and getting her skirts muddy.

Luncheon or 'Nuncheon' (pronounced 'noonshine')

As men were likely to be out during the day and it was considered effeminate to take Nuncheon, this meal was generally a female affair, so much so in fact that the Prince Regent was openly mocked by caricaturists at the time for taking Nuncheon.

Presenting for Dinner

It was not unknown for women to spend the whole afternoon dressing. At 4pm sharp, guests presented themselves, formally dressed, in the drawing room, where they would converse in small groups. It might be the first time of the day that the young men and women of the house party had seen each other.

Every member of the party dressed according to rank: those of the middling classes didn't have the quality of dress or jewels enjoyed by richer houseguests. For men this is less divisive as it was the fashion for them to dress similarly.

Dinner

When dinner was announced the mistress of the house requested that the lady next in rank would accompany the Host and lead the party to the table, while the hostess brought up the rear.

Mealtimes were seen as a useful opportunity to gauge the character and disposition of members of the opposite sex. Advice books warned that a woman who ate slowly was likely to be of a lazy disposition.

Dinner was a formal affair, it was served at approximately 6pm (sometimes as late as eight in the fashionable houses of the Capital and lasted up to three or four hours. Guests were served in accordance with their status. It was extremely bad manners not to eat and drink heartily: guests were expected to drink and finish each glass as it was served, accompanied by a toast, to the host (political leader, fashionable beau or honoured guest).

After desert the tablecloth was removed and the table covered in wine decanters. Women might have one or two glasses of wine with the men and then retire to the female space of the drawing room while the gentlemen carried on drinking for a good couple of hours at the dinner table.

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Next: Regency Science



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