

Regency Manor

The Help

In 19th century England, there were a myriad of occupations in service, each with a very particular job and each with a very particular status in the social ladder within the confines of a household.

For the rich, it was a sure sign of class to have many servants, but not only that, it meant that they never had to lift a finger to do any work themselves. Small households might have one girl who did nearly everything for the family for whom she worked, whereas a larger household might have several maids, a cook, a house-keeper, a butler and a number of stable hands.

Servants were a necessity in the middle and upper-class households of the 1800s and for me to go through the roles of each one would be impossible as it is so detailed.

Here's some information which will give you a bit of an idea...



"The Servants" - By Ellen Micheletti (original site here)

We are so used to modern conveniences that we have forgotten how much sheer labor is involved in keeping a house without them. Imagine having to take care of a huge mansion with no vacuum cleaners, no washing machines, no bathtubs or indoor toilets, no piped in water and no central heating. Now try and keep this place clean while you and your neighbors burn coal that fills the air with smoke and smuts.

Readers of historical novels are familiar with some of the servants that large establishments employed to do all the work required to keep the place running smoothly. Large estates had an army of outdoor servants (gardeners, gamekeepers, and grooms) and an equally large army of indoor servants. The number and kinds of servants varied depending on the social status of the employer and the size of the estate. I am going to concentrate on the indoor servants only, and the servants who are most likely to be encountered by readers of historical fiction.

Male servants ranked above female servants and non-liveried servants, those who did not wear uniforms, ranked above those servants who did. The highest ranking male servant (who in some ways was more a professional employee than a true servant), was the land steward. He was often the son of a minister or businessman. Some land stewards were attorneys and had their own homes and own businesses on the side. The steward was the manager of the estate. He hired and fired workers, settled tenant complaints, saw to the harvesting of crops, managed the timber, collected the rents and kept all the financial records. Very wealthy men with more than one estate had several land stewards. A reader often encounters a land steward (sometimes called a bailiff) in regency fiction. David Wiggins in Carla Kelly's *The Lady's Companion* is the steward who manages the farm for Lady Bushnell.

The highest ranking male house servant was the valet. He cared for his employer's clothing, shined his shoes and boots, did the hairdressing and barbering and made sure the gentleman looked good. A valet had to be well-dressed himself, but was not to outshine his employer. When the gentleman went shopping or travelling, the valet went along since there were men who literally could not dress or undress themselves without assistance (those regency coats and boots were tight!)

A few, very wealthy homes employed a house steward, but he is not often encountered in fiction. The highest ranking male house servant, next to the valet, was the butler. The butler's duties varied depending on the size of the house. He was in charge of the wine cellar and in the days before refrigeration, that was a delicate task. He was in charge of the silver and gold plate, china, and crystal. He supervised the cleaning of this valuable silver and gold and guarded it against thieves. As time passed, the position of the butler gained more and more prestige until he became the top servant in Victorian times - in charge of the men and women underservants. While the butler did not wear livery, he did alter his clothing slightly while on duty - he wore a black tie rather than a white one for instance. It would not do to mistake the butler for a gentleman.

The highest ranking indoor liveried servant was the footman. Footmen did many jobs around the house - both indoors and outside. Inside, he laid the table, waited at table, served tea, answered the door and assisted the butler. Outside, he rode on the carriage, opened doors, served as an escort when a lady paid calls, and carried torches to deter thieves when the lady and gentleman went out at night. The footman carried letters to and fro and special footmen called "running footmen" ran in front of or beside a carriage. These running footmen had mostly died out by the time of the regency, but in their prime, they were colorful characters, both literally and figuratively. They often wore very bright and luxurious livery and some noblemen would organize footraces between their running footmen. The qualifications for being a footman were good looks and a good physique. Their livery was knee breeches, often plush ones with silk stockings (footmen had to have good legs) and coats of satin and velvet with starched shirts. Footmen had to powder their hair - a custom that did not die out among the Buckingham Palace footmen until



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Prince Philip put a stop to it. He thought it was unhygienic.

Sometimes, in regency novels, a reader will encounter a page. A page was a young boy who was sort of an apprentice footman. He performed odd jobs and tasks and was put into livery to stand around and look good when the lady chose to entertain. Sometimes the page was a young Black boy who was put into an especially fancy livery and treated almost like an ornament.

Women servants did not rank as high as men and were not paid as much even though their work was often harder. A footman carried letters, but a chambermaid often had to climb flights of stairs with loads of coal for the fire or cans of hot water for the bath.

The highest ranking woman servant was the housekeeper. She kept the keys to all the storage closets and supervised the maids and cook. She served as the butler's right hand helper. She kept books and household accounts and ordered food and supplies. She very much ran the house.

The next highest woman servant and one often encountered in regency novels is the personal maid [lady's maid] or "abigail," as regency slang termed her. She dressed and undressed the lady, cleaned, pressed and mended rips in clothing and did the lady's hair. In the Victorian age, when clothing was very heavy and elaborate (and buttoned and laced up the back) a woman could literally not get dressed or undressed without assistance just like the regency fops with their tight coats. Personal maids also looked after the jewelry and served as a companion and confidante. It was very much the thing to have a personal maid who was French, but if a lady could not find a French maid, an English personal maid who could speak a few French phrases was almost as good.

The cook was considered to be of better quality if she had trained with a male chef. Not many people were wealthy enough to afford a male chef, so they searched for female cooks who had trained with men. The cook was the dictator of the kitchen. She is sometimes portrayed in fiction as a tyrant and that was true in some real life cases. There is a very funny scene in Mary Balogh's *The Famous Heroine* where Lord Francis is amazed to find that his new wife Cora is not only not afraid of the cook, she has been swapping recipes with her. The cook had many kitchen helpers to assist her in the massive amounts of cooking that had to be done. There were always scullery maids (the lowest of the female servants) whose job it was to clean the pots and pans. These poor girls spent their days with their hands in hot water and harsh washing soda. After a large party, there could be hundreds of greasy pots and pans to clean before the girls could go to bed.

There were several kinds of maids - chambermaids, parlormaids and maids-of-all-work. These young women were the ones who swept, dusted, polished, cleaned, washed, fetched and carried from early morning till late at night. In Frank Dawes' book *Not In Front of the Servants*, he gives a schedule of the week for maids that has them working from 6:30 am till 10:00 pm with one half-day off a week. They had to do all the cleaning and polishing with none of the labor saving devices we take for granted. There was no such thing as polish for instance. Furniture polish was made from linseed oil, turpentine and beeswax. Carpets had to be brushed by hand, lamps had to be cleaned and filled and fires had to be kept lit and tended. This necessitated maids lugging large amounts of coal up flights of stairs to all the fireplaces, and a large estate could have many, many fireplaces. The sheer amount of work involved in a maid's job is difficult to imagine. Maids wore two kinds of clothing. In the mornings when most of the heavy work was done, they wore cotton print dresses and heavy aprons. Later in the afternoon, they changed into black dresses with ruffled aprons and caps with streamers. By Victorian times, all but the wealthiest had given up footmen and the maids answered the doors and announced visitors.

The era of large estates and many servants died out after World War I. For a long time, a job as a servant was the only one a respectable young woman could get, and after jobs in offices and factories became available, few young women or men wanted to spend long hours working for little money and little chance to have a life of their own. More job opportunities, smaller houses and more labor saving devices finally put an end to the huge numbers of servants who used to work in stately homes.



More information...

From Masterpiece Theatre...

Cleaning, laundry, cooking, care of horses and carriages -- every detail of daily life involved hard physical labor and a 'staff,' of some size, was required to allow ladies and gentlemen to maintain their genteel lifestyle.

While there were a number of different kinds of maids, in simple households, a 'maid-of-all-work' was hired to wash, scrub, cook, clean, take care of children and perform myriad other tasks. This was a back-breaking job, often starting at six in the morning and stretching until eleven at night, all for a minimum wage.

In homes where more than one maid was affordable, housemaids were responsible for all the labor of keeping the house clean and the fires burning. The housemaid heated water for baths (and toted it up and down stairs), cleaned the ashes out of grates, made the beds, beat the rugs, emptied the chamber pots, dusted, polished and so on.

Kitchenmaids lit fires and helped the cook with the washing and scrubbing; the nursemaid was charged with the supervision of the children in a family; the lady's maid had superior status in the hierarchy of household servants, as she personally attended to the needs and desires of the lady of the house. A house steward or valet could fulfill the same requirements for a man.

In great homes with a small army of servants, a housekeeper supervised the female (indoor) staff and a butler supervised the male staff -- which could include footmen, pages and watchmen. Coachmen, gardeners, grooms (stablehands) and gamekeepers rounded out the outdoor staff.

Servants generally stayed in the background, both literally and figuratively. They were expected to do their job quietly and without complaint.



From the Regency Townhouse site...

In the more affluent houses, it was common place to have servants, to attend to your every need. In order to keep the house running from day to day a great deal of servants were needed. One must remember that in the 19th century they had no labour saving devices, like central heating, washing machines and dishwashers, that we take for granted today. Even preparing a simple meal for a family of four was a major task.

The good fortune and comforts of Regency living were not extended to those in service. The basement annexe is a vast space laid out for the needs of the working environment and incorporates some spartan living accommodation for the servants. The family would probably have employed between eight and twelve servants who were given their food and accommodation as part of their wages. Some would live in the attic bedrooms and some above the stables, but if these rooms were full, servants might have to sleep in the servants' hall and kitchen.

To the modern eye the basement is strikingly dark and cold. In the Regency period the only light in these rooms was from the sash windows and tallow candles or oil lamps. These coupled with the small coal fires would have made the basement very smoky. Original stone flags cover the floors of the basement and the plaster walls have curved corners to allow the servants to move around quickly and easily without injury. The hallway would have been particularly busy with the coming and going of delivery men, bells summoning the maids upstairs and the staff going briskly about their duties.

The smooth running of a Regency household required a large number of servants so it was fortunate that changing social conditions provided a good supply of applicants. A rising population, changes in farming techniques requiring fewer labourers and the hardships of factory work made life in service an increasingly attractive alternative, especially for men. In spite of the long days and often mundane tasks, domestic service provided a certain amount of security as accommodation and regular meals were part of the package. In the early nineteenth century labour was cheap and the wages for those in service were among the lowest. The diary of William Taylor, a footman in a small but well-to-do London household, reveals that in 1837 he was paid 10 guineas per quarter (£42 per annum) supplemented by a further £15 in tips during the year. In the Royal Pavilion the rather more lowly housemaids were paid a generous £45 per year, well above the national average, so much so that Prince Albert was later to reduce this to a mere £12. Even though £1 in 1820 had the purchasing power of £33.49 in 1999, it still represents an income of only £400 in today's terms.

Other staff included footmen whose special tasks were to clean the boots and shoes, to act as valet to the master of the household, to look after the oil lamps and candles, clean the looking glasses and polish the furniture in the principal rooms and attend the master or mistress when they went out in the carriage. The delineation of duties was apparent even in the simple task of washing up. For instance, the butler washed glasses (usually in a lead lined sink to help avoid breakages) and also cleaned the silver plate and forks, though knives were the prerogative of the footman. The housemaids washed the china while the washing up of pots and pans fell to the lowly and poorly paid scullery maid. Most tasks were labour intensive compared with today.

The housemaids rose earliest, to clean the grates and light the fires ready for the family. First the grates and fire irons had to be cleaned by rubbing them with oil and then emery paper or brick dust followed by scouring paper. The rest of the fireplace would be brushed with black lead while the marble hearth would be washed with soap and hot water and finally dried with a linen cloth. Housemaids would use a tinder box to light the first fire of the day. This contained a flammable fabric such as linen which would be ignited by striking a flint against steel. This in turn was used to ignite a match dipped in sulphur.

Although a servant's life could involve security and companionship, much depended on the employer. William Taylor worked for a kindly and fair employer but nevertheless made these poignant comments in his diary.



And finally... From Regency Library...

The Housekeeper (this role is reserved for the owner of the list!)

The housekeeper of a first rate establishment has, like the steward in his department, the entire direction of the female servants. Her value and importance to her principals depends mainly upon her vigilant superintendence of each branch of female service, and on her constant investigation into the efficiency, steadiness, and general good conduct of each individual under her charge. It is her duty to see that the business of the house is regularly and properly performed; that everything is done in its right season, everything applied to its right use, and kept in its right place. Order, with dispatch, should be the law of the house; a law that carries on every business easily and tranquilly. Where observed, confusion and hurry rarely occur.

The care of furniture, of household linen, of all culinary and domestic utensils, devolves on the housekeeper. The charge of the store-room belongs to her also. Whatever stores are purchased she receives, examines, and weighs them; notes down, either in the store-book, or on tickets which she gives to the steward, the weight of each article, such memorandums serving as a check upon the accounts of tradespeople. She stores the deposits in appropriate jars or vessels, and places each commodity in a situation best suited to its nature as to temperature.

With cooking generally the housekeeper has little concern. Her care of the table is confined chiefly to packing and preserving, and in preparing confectionary, arranging the dessert, and making the ice-creams. The preparations are all performed in the still-room, and with the assistance of the still-room maid. Fulfilling each branch of her duty faithfully, the housekeeper, at the head of a large female establishment, has no sinccure.

The early hours of the day are engaged in seeing that others are properly at work, then following her still-room employments &c.; when all household business is ended, she has to set the maids to their sewing, placing in their hands the household linen, which requires to be made or repaired.

Her evening should be occupied with preparations for the ensuing day. Lump-sugar is broken, raisins stoned, currants washed, cleansed, and dried. Spices pounded and bottled, oranges and lemons peeled, and the juice strained and bottled for use.

In her books she has then to enter expenditures of the day, and to note down such articles as are required in her store-room. Half yearly, or at convenient periods, she has to compare the inventories given to her on entering the family, with the articles enumerated, and in making out new lists she makes notes of the deficiency which time or other causes have produced, and also of the articles which have been added to replenish such deficiencies.

The housekeeper at the head of a small establishment, in which there is neither house-steward, nor man cook, has many other duties to perform besides those enumerated above: marketing in such a case falls on her, and the higher branches of cookery, together with the arrangement of the table.

Note: In Stewart's Sketches of Society in Great Britain and Ireland, he relates upon visiting several houses, where upper servants, in particular the housekeeper, served as tour guide on days when the houses were open to the public that "The fees derived from this source (the charge for seeing the house), by upper servants in some principal show-houses in the kingdom must amount to a handsome income; and I am told on good authority, that a late housekeeper in this castle, left by will, to a younger son of the family, at the close of a long service, a fortune of many thousand pounds, chiefly accumulated this way." The castle in this instance was Warwick castle.