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# Social Background



URING THE CLASS-RIDDEN Victorian era, the social divide between rich and poor had become a chasm. By the turn of the century, poverty had reached shocking levels, especially in cities, and in his 1901 report on the slums of York the Quaker philanthropist Seebohm Rowntree concluded that 28 per cent of the population of the city was living in intolerable hardship. At the same time he concluded that ‘the keeping of or not keeping of servants’ was the defining line between the working classes and those of a superior social standing.

Domestic service, while arduous and all-consuming, provided a reasonable alternative to the slums and a certain amount of social status, and was taken up by a significant number of both sexes in Britain. A large percentage of women who worked were in service. The 1901 census showed that they numbered 1,690,686 women, or 40.5 per cent of the adult female working population.

Children, particularly girls, also made up a significant proportion of the lower posts in a large household and the higher up the social scale the employer, the more cachet was awarded to the positions in the house. Young girls would be looking for a post in a good home from the age of twelve or thirteen, and in some cases they started as young as ten. And while many of these came from the city slums, employers often preferred to take the children of rural families, who were considered to be more conscientious and hard-working than those from the cities.

Work was hard but maids were an essential addition to all homes from the lower middle classes upwards. In an age of few labour-saving appliances, the mistress of the house would struggle to run even an average-sized household on her own. An aristocratic seat or country house would require a large staff in order to run from day to day, while even a modest middle-class home would employ one or two servants.

At the turn of the century, however, things were beginning to change, at least for the professional classes. In his 1904 publication *The English House*, German architect Hermann Muthesius said that many middle-class families complained that, with new opportunities for working women in shops and offices, '£20 maids', those who earned around £20 annually, were hard to come by. That, along with the introduction of household appliances over the coming years, led to a decline in domestic staff and a rethink of the architecture of middle-income homes. Houses became smaller, cosier and more manageable for a

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housewife and, after the First World War, staff were to be found in the wealthier households alone.

In the years leading up to the war, a family's social standing was heavily dependent on the number of staff it could afford to employ, as this was an obvious indication of wealth. Many of the richer families would employ up to twenty staff and, in the larger aristocratic homes, it often increased to thirty or forty. At the Duke of Westminster's country seat, Eaton Hall in Cheshire, there were over three hundred servants, although this was an exceptionally large number, even amongst the aristocracy.



*Eaton Hall in Cheshire*

The 6th Marquess of Bath was born in 1905 at Longleat, a vast rolling estate in Wiltshire, and died in 1992. As a child he had his own valet and his parents employed a total of forty-three indoor staff. In 1973, when he and his wife were making do with