
Conference report

Domestic Service in England 1600–2000

The conference opened with the work of three established scholars: Jeremy Boulton and Leonard Schwarz, from Newcastle and Birmingham Universities respectively, on 'Domestic service and the law of settlement in the West End, 1725–1824' and Carolyn Stedman from Warwick University on 'Bodies in service. Waged domestic work and the making of modern persons'. They gave shape to the broad theme of the first panel, 'Service in the long eighteenth century' through presentations based on their considerable experience of the subject and its challenges.

Boulton and Schwarz's paper derived from an ESRC and Wellcome Trust funded project that saw the transcription and linkage of records uniquely available for the parish of St Martin's in the Fields in the West End of London. The wealth of records (over 86,000 for the workhouse, nearly 26,000 settlement examinations and nearly 73,000 burial records) did not protect the research team from the challenges that investigating domestic service presents. For instance, in the settlement examinations a person could and did name more than one period of service whilst on the other hand very probably omitting information about shorter periods of employment. From a database management perspective this resulted in a high proportion of one-to-many and many-to-many relationships, adding further complexities to the analysis. However, with its heterogeneous profile—St Martin's population ranged from the very poor in the workhouse to the very rich at the Duke of Northumberland's palace—and a high proportion of domestic servants among its population, the parish provides a fruitful if rather exceptional case study into the sex-ratio and wage levels of domestic servants for the period immediately preceding the age when domestic service is understood to have assumed mass proportions. About 5 percent of employers employed male servants—a measure of the wealth of households in the West End. On the other side of the relationship, the study confirmed the vulnerability of those in service, as about 25–30 percent of domestic servants ended up in the workhouse. The quantitative data yielded the statistics that challenge an audience but, intriguing to this listener, the qualitative elements, such as the range of detail about the individual's experience of domestic service in potential very differently situated households, confirmed the frequently referenced article by Schwarz that domestic service was the means by which individuals underwent different and dramatic experiences in culturally very diverse environments (L. Schwarz, 'English servants and their employers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', *Economic History Review*, 52 (1999), 236–56).

Stedman opened her talk with a warning about contemporary statistics; we have to be wary about what eighteenth-century compilers meant when they were counting—and counting servants they certainly did. People employed in service were a topic of the law and, along with many other taxes, the early modern employer of domestic help paid tax for this amenity. Unlike agricultural labourers, male domestic servants were taxed throughout the eighteenth century and female domestic servants, though untaxed for most of the century, incurred a tax between 1785 and 1792. This seven-year period generated voluminous amounts of protest and unrest, which reveal much about contemporary attitudes and expectations about domestic service as a commodity. Based on cases brought forward by those aggrieved about being taxed for a servant, which in their view did not fall into the taxable category, Stedman introduced the audience to the broad spectrum of people who employed domestic servants, the broad spectrum of tax avoidance and exemptions and the ongoing wrestle with definitions as to what makes a servant a domestic servant. Eighteenth-century thinkers, preoccupied with service, re-theorised labour, and the view of the servant as the extra limb or prosthesis of her (more rarely his) employer's body is one of the powerful images Stedman's talk provided.

Hundreds of tax appeal meetings across the country show something very familiar about the way tax exemptions were introduced. For example, families with two children or more did not have to pay tax for their one servant (usually female), and female servants under 14 and over 60 were also exempt. The painstaking work of tax collectors (who paid three visits to ascertain the tax burden for each householder) produced meticulous records in the process and, at the same time, historians need to be aware of the shadow population of servants. The actual number of servants was much higher than the number of recorded servants, in particular female servants (such as charwomen, cleaners, washerwomen, childminders) and all those working for families with more than one child since they were never taxed and therefore do not appear in the records. Stedman suggests a solution to historians' problems, which is to abandon the search for the 'domestic servant' and to focus instead on the 'waged domestic servant'. She concedes, though, that even this may not be the perfect solution, since a servant was not necessarily paid wages but received other forms of remuneration. The notion that the hire agreement or contract made a servant a person was the tantalising end to the talk and since Stedman's presentation was based on her recent book, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), many will want to follow up this fascinating insight by looking at the fuller exploration.

In the second session, two papers examined the role of domestic servants in childcare in the later Victorian period. Dr Melanie Reynolds, from Oxford Brookes University, spoke first on 'Investigating childcare practices by domestic servants in the later nineteenth century'. Taking as her starting point a quote from a middle-class employer, Mrs Dalton, that 'It takes "Great Pains" to instruct my domestic servant!', she asked whether servants were as ignorant, neglectful and sometimes cruel towards children as they were described

by some contemporaries and historians, and went on to look at what skills they actually displayed. Her research has concentrated on the north of England, where infant mortality was highest and cases of severe child neglect commonly reported.

During the eighteenth century it had been common for servants to care for the children in a household and this continued into the nineteenth century. Some servants were undoubtedly extremely incompetent, if not malevolent, and Dr Reynolds cited court cases that illustrated the worst fears of employers: that of Joanna Connell, for instance, who gave her mistress's infant son acid to drink (the court accepted her plea that she had mistaken it for water). A natural extension of the belief that servants lacked a nurturing capacity was that working-class women would behave as badly towards their own children. But to what extent could these women, in general, be held responsible for child neglect and high infant mortality? There is evidence to show that middle-class employers actually owed a debt to servants such as Emily Jones and Margaret Brown of York, praised for their 'quiet dedication and efficiency'. One way to evaluate the attitude of the female servant class towards children is to see how they behaved under difficult circumstances. Dr Reynolds presented an occupational proportionate breakdown of female workhouse inmates aged 15–44, taken from Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Oxford, demonstrating that servants formed a significant section of the younger, able-bodied workhouse population in the 1880s. Whilst there, she argued, they were often expected to take on a nursing role and by using the reports of the Poor Law Inspectors it is possible to assess how successfully they carried this out. In 1881 Leeds Workhouse housed 77 children and they were described as well cared for; the 'nurses' also helped to deliver babies and care for mothers and infants, kept the surroundings as hygienic as possible and played with the children as much as they could. The medical profession, too, through comment in *The Lancet*, recognised these women as 'the best side of parish nursing', citing them as generally zealous and willing. Their 'good nature' in often poor working conditions, and intelligence, encouraged contemporaries such as Miss Pringle, a friend of Florence Nightingale, to describe them as the 'best type of women', with innate 'motherliness of nature'. The Manchester Union gave the women training if it was thought they could benefit from it and in 1881 opened a school for nurses, former domestic servants being considered ideal material. It seems, therefore, that despite common opinion that servants were neglectful and lazy, this was not based on actual practice. Far from being 'slow, lazy and feckless', given the opportunity many of them showed compassion and a degree of professionalism when called upon to work with children in the workhouse. Women and children still died in the workhouses but this cannot be attributed to a lack of care by these temporary nurses.

The second paper, by Sian Pooley, of Cambridge University, was entitled ' "A stranger in the house"? Servants and childcare in late-nineteenth century England', and reflected Sian's current project seeking the commonalities between very different communities with relation to childcare by live-in servants. Emily Hall's diaries of the 1870s describe the trials

of finding good servants and the often exasperating and disruptive behaviour of these young, single women in the home. It was apparent that servants were often seen as a race apart and the 'servant problem' was a common theme of the period. Letters, diaries, autobiographies and newspapers provide personal testimony, while using the census it is possible to estimate the numbers of families employing live-in domestic servants. Breaking down this figure further to show the number of servants in the household, the areas of Durham (a mining area), Burnley (a manufacturing town), Lancaster (a market town) and Bromley (a professional part of London) illustrate widely differing examples. Employing servants was not always a sign of class: in Durham miners were commonly employers of servants, 36 per cent of employing families lived in 4 rooms or less. In the north combining domestic service and childcare was rarer, parents tending to prefer arrangements outside of the home. Only in Bromley were families employing more than one servant dominant; here, too, specialist childcare was more common than with families in the north. Having servants was an aspiration; people did not tend to get rid of their servants in bad times and would still employ them even when in relative poverty.

Was the nurse a 'stranger in the house'? Where families had only one servant the gulf between the classes was less apparent and the servant may have come from a home not much different to that in which she worked. Here, however, the servant rarely took on the care of children, the mother herself (or older siblings) retaining that role and often doing the lighter household tasks as well. In multiple-servant households childcare was a shared responsibility and parents seemed to show a lack of concern about their children mixing with servants, the boundaries of class being widely ignored until the period before the First World War when differences began to be emphasised. The children's nurse is the most common servant to feature in diaries and autobiographies, and contact was often kept up long after children had grown up. Yet despite the fact that they worked alongside their mistresses and travelled with them, some spending their whole lives caring for children of the family, the gulf of culture, tastes and appearance remained. Governesses, in fact, proved to be the 'alien presence' in these families rather than the nurse; they often instigated a new regime after the nurse had left and the relationship could prove stressful for parents, who may have come from a very similar background. By the early twentieth century the governess had been largely dispensed with. Returning to Emily Hall's diaries, it was evident that servants frequently took great care and a delight in their relationship with the children of the house.

After lunch the third panel commenced with Jacob Field, from the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, talking about the structure of service in England in the long eighteenth century, asking 'Who did the servants serve?' The late seventeenth century to the mid eighteenth century is now seen as the 'high water mark' of live-in domestic service in England, and Jacob has used pre-census population listings to examine who kept servants. The listings cluster in the 1690-1710 period and from 1790-1820. The picture is complex but the listings show a general decline, and

feminisation, of live-in service over the period. The headlines, from a talk with much detail, include:

- the percentage of households keeping live-in servants fell from 33 per cent to 16.8 per cent
- multi-servant households become rarer
- the fall was larger among servants in urban areas
- at the start of the period more householders in the south were keeping live-in servants, but this was reversed by the early nineteenth century
- the proportion of married-couple households with live-in servants fell
- gentry and esquire households continued to employ the same numbers of male live-in servants, but they declined among all other groups
- occupational status was an important determinant of keeping servants; between the two periods the largest falls in servant keeping were in households in the clothing, textile and footwear industries.

David Thorpe, Honorary Senior Research Fellow at University College London, took the story on with another very detailed presentation 'Who kept domestic servants 1851–1921: geographic and social variations'. He divided live-in servants into groups:

- functional, including those in farm service, servants in shops, public houses and similar
- female replacement and female alternatives (for example amongst widowed men)
- those relating to status and life-style of the household, linked both to social class and to servants meeting family needs, such as age, illness or having young children.

He also reminded us to think about the 'quality' of the servants, with young children being cheaper and more likely to be employed in 'functional' roles. David showed some of the early reports which demonstrate the relationship between the social class of the head of household and the likelihood of having servants, but suggested that the households which did not fit the stereotypes might be particularly interesting: why did 15 per cent of the upper middle classes not have live-in servants, for example? He also suggested that, outside the middle class, servants were very largely 'female replacements or female alternatives', and that analysis of servant keeping in different geographic areas should be considered in this light. David's analysis included some fascinating analyses of the geography of servant-keeping in 1851 and later. For 1911 he was able to analyse the number of female domestic servants in relation to the percentage of adult males who were in professions or were merchants in the area. David ran out of time to show us all his analysis but did suggest that there were fewer female live-in domestic servants in areas where there was more alternative work for women.

Finally, coming far further into the twentieth century, Lucy Delap, from St Catherine's College, Cambridge, talked on 'The holes left by the departed Mary-Ann': servantless homes and the decline of domestic service in twentieth century Britain'. She described the increase (amongst the former servant-keeping classes) in 'servantlessness', with a long drawn-out transition between the 1920s and 1950s, with the post-war demise of domestic service followed by a resurgence in the 1980s when demand outstripped supply. Lucy looked in detail at some of the literature, from the Edwardian period onwards, on the problems of 'servantlessness' and how women of a particular class were intensely anxious about how to live without servants. Lucy emphasised something that Jacob had mentioned in relation to the eighteenth century: the growing idea of domestic privacy, and the increase in social 'distance' which made servants living-in less attractive to many. The growth in 'labour saving' devices and the fall in the number of children were also important, as was the fall in the physical size of middle class houses, which meant it was more difficult to maintain status divisions. Having a 'daily' but no live-in servant was still seen as being 'servantless' and the 1930s saw far more 'daily' servants, often older women working as a char. But even in the 1970s there was still a sense of the 'holes' left by the lack of servants. Lucy concluded that the decline in domestic service was in fact far slower than the media thought, which meant perhaps that it was easier for households to return to employing more 'helps' in the 1980s; domestic service was never totally displaced, and the distinctions between the old and new ways of living were not as clear cut as often presented.

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