

LIFE BELOW STAIRS

In the late 1920's, when Mrs Daisy Gulliver left school at the age of fourteen, jobs were few and far between for girls and just about the only option open to them would have been to go into service. Mrs Gulliver entered service at the age of fourteen as a scullery maid at Stoneythorpe Hall in Southam. Here she was trained by the cook in the routine of the kitchen and the preparation of food. The scullery maid was the one who did all of the rough work in the kitchen and Mrs Gulliver remembers having to black lead the grate and the range before there would be any hot water available for her to get on with the rest of her duties.

On leaving Stoneythorpe Hall Daisy went to work for Lord and Lady Shuckburgh at Shuckburgh Hall. She was employed as an 'in-between' maid. The work of the 'tweeny' seems to have consisted of a little bit of everything and Mrs Gulliver was trained to work in the kitchen, as well as being housemaid and parlourmaid. As the Shuckburgh's only spent the summer months at Shuckburgh Hall, spending the winter in their London home, Mrs Gulliver had to find other employment for half of the year. Although people were willing to employ servants on this basis, they didn't really like it and, of course, references had always to be shown before you would even be considered for a position.

There were eleven servants employed at Shuckburgh Hall, all overseen by the housekeeper, Miss Brown. Mrs Gulliver remembers having to sneak out to go to village dances because she wasn't considered old enough to go to a dance unescorted. She and her fellow workers would walk down into Shuckburgh village where the boyfriend of one of them would be waiting with his lorry to take them into Napton for the dance. Even the older staff, who had permission to go, had to be back by nine o'clock. Mrs Gulliver remembers creeping back into the Hall and climbing gingerly up the oak staircase which led to the servants sleeping quarters because every stair creaked. Mrs Gulliver describes the sleeping quarters as a row of cubicles, each holding a bed and a bedside table, looking, as she says, like 'a row of toilets.'

Mrs Gulliver remembers the dinner parties at the Hall, when important guests would be visiting. Six courses would not be unusual, although she recalls that only small portions would be served. The menus would be diverse, the lady of the house would plan what was to be served and the cook and assistant cook would prepare it. Breakfast was a large meal, with a whole ham being put on the table along with porridge, eggs, cream, toast and butter etc.

Most of the produce used at Shuckburgh Hall was supplied by local tradesmen. The vegetables would all have been grown in the Hall's kitchen garden, meat was supplied by a butcher in Harbury and all other produce used was bought in Southam. As there were no fridges in those days, the problem of storing food had to be overcome by having everything delivered fresh daily, or, in the case of fruit, bottling it. Eggs were preserved in isinglass or by painting them with fat.

Mrs Gulliver remembers the Shuckburgh's as being good people to work for and she stayed there for three summers before leaving to take up another post. Her last job before she married was as a cook in a large house in Allesley village.

During the second war Shuckburgh Hall was used as a Red Cross hospital and Mrs Gulliver's sister, Mrs Amy Fessey, was employed there as a cook. She remembers some of the food shortages being solved by huge crates of perfectly preserved eggs being sent all the way from America along with boxes of dried banana. The dried banana would be reconstituted with water, spread over a base of shortcrust pastry and topped with cream to make, as she recalls, a delicious dessert for the patients.

Mrs Fessey remembers, during her time at the Hall, a visit made by a member of the Royal Family. They had spent days scrubbing and cleaning in preparation and when the big day arrived the visitor swept by and didn't even go into the rooms they had so carefully cleaned. A recent visit by the present Queen is recalled by Mrs Gulliver for it's amusing outcome. She tells us...

"The Queen was to arrive by helicopter which would land on the lawns at Shuckburgh Hall. They mowed the grass in readiness but forgot to rake up the mowings. So, of course, when the helicopter landed the bits of loose grass flew up in the air, covering the local dignitaries waiting to greet the Queen."

Mr and Mrs Gill also remember the days when it was common for the richer families to have live in servants. Sam tells us...

"The servants in the house were very much the underdog. They had to wear particular caps and aprons, they had morning ones and then they had to change in the afternoon. They were only in the kitchen, you know, in the sense that they weren't allowed to mix in anything. That was in Pem's day. I can remember all my sisters went to Coventry and worked at the 'Pens' or at the solicitors.

You usually went every other Sunday to Church and, usually, had half a day off. One of my sisters worked for a doctor at Southam and she had half a day off. She would come out, visit her boyfriend and bring a cake or something which she probably would have made up or fiddled. She used to work all hours. She would be at their beck and call even if she was in bed. You didn't work from nine till five or anything like that, you were on call as and when required. Even in Gladys' time she was often asked to stay late at the Vicarage to serve at the table."

Gladys remembers that there weren't many jobs about and some of them didn't pay very much...

"At the Vicarage I was paid seven shillings and sixpence a week."

Sam continues...

"When Pem was working she was paid a shilling a week. She had to wear all the proper uniform, caps and aprons. She also had to wear black dresses. The uniforms weren't provided by your employer, you had to supply them yourself. Pem went into service because her parents couldn't afford to keep her, she had to go and live somewhere to be fed. The money she received was merely pocket money. Most girls went into service, it was only the rich families whose daughters didn't have to work. Pem was grateful for the job as it gave her somewhere to live and she was fed. She used to get Sundays off to go to Church but her employer didn't like her going at all. She used to go home to visit her family and he didn't like that either. Your employer was 'the authority', you did as you were told; when the bell rang, you answered it."