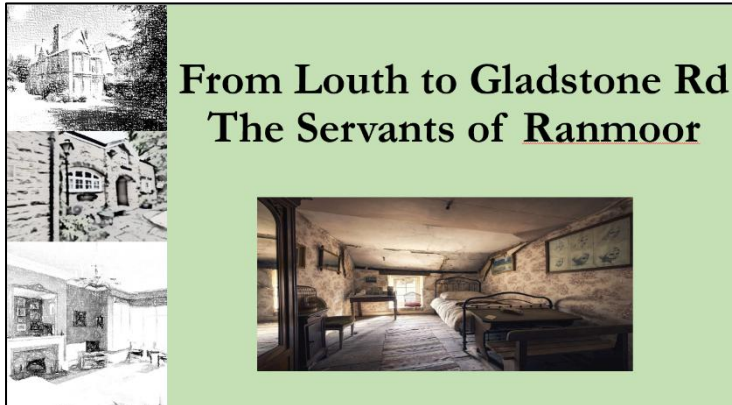


Scissors Paper Stone

From Louth to Gladstone Rd: The Servants of Ranmoor Part I

This is an edited version of a talk given by Mary Grover for Scissors Paper Stone at St John's Ranmoor.



The 1891 Census records 179 residential servants in the electoral ward of Ranmoor, only 4 of them male. This high proportion of female staff shows how unhelpful the wonderful television documentaries and dramas about life below stairs can be. Most households in Britain did not have a formidable Mr Carson waiting in the wings. Whereas the butler, the footman and the valet were prominent below stairs in *Downton Abbey*, the majority of Britain's servants in the nineteenth

century were women without supervision from male servants, or even from a female housekeeper. A woman's experience of work in service differed hugely according to the size of the household and the way she was managed. The bigger the household the clearer and more limited her role.

The majority of female servants in Britain and in Ranmoor worked in one- or two-servant homes, large villas rather than mansions. The function of domestic servants was rather different in the two kinds of dwelling. Servants in mansions served not only to make their employers comfortable but to be part of the performance of newly acquired power. The brewer John Newton Mappin in Birchlands, and the industrialist Henry Steel in Tapton Court, had small fleets of live-in servants, each with a designated role. Some of these servants were men. Steel employed both a butler and a footman, neither of which appear to be needed in any of the villas of Gladstone Rd.

The physical appearance of footmen and butlers reveals the theatrical nature of domestic life in the largest dwellings. Height in a butler was desirable. One would-be footman advertises his 'extensive calves' in an 1850 edition of the *Times*. These beautiful men could be cruelly mocked by metropolitan papers.

None of such nonsense for the owners of houses in Gladstone Road. But for Henry Steel in Tapton Court, imposing or beguiling male staff would have been part of his display of prestige, for example when he entertained his old friend the Prince of Wales. Steel had made his first fortune as the prince's bookmaker negotiating royal bets in race-courses across the country.



The striking feature of the households in Ranmoor at this period is the huge variety of the ways in which they were configured. The nine villas of Gladstone Road illustrate this variety. Few employers of residential staff in Ranmoor came from families who had employed residential staff. So, unlike the

established rural gentry in Norton, Ecclesfield or Bakewell few Ranmoor industrialists or their wives inherited a tradition of domestic management. Steel's first job had been as a barrow boy and the founder of St John's, John Newton Mappin, had started life as an engraver of pearl handles.

Mappin, like Steel and the colliery owner, Denys Hague, put on a good show. They all desired to create a home which exhibited artistic taste. Mappin was also musical. When his wife died, he employed a Miss Susanna Lill as both housekeeper and possibly pianist. (No housekeepers or pianists in Gladstone Rd.) The personal value Mappin put on cultural sophistication is demonstrated by his legacy, to Miss Lill. On his death in 1883, in addition to a large annuity he left her the extremely expensive Erard piano on which she might have entertained Mappin and perhaps his guests in the evening.

It was unusual for a female employee such as Susannah to receive a bequest. It is the value of male outdoor staff that is most often recognised in Ranmoor wills, perhaps because of the key role of gardeners, grooms or chauffeurs in creating a sense of affluence and elegance. In a grand house such outdoor male staff might live in the lodge at the gateway to the drive. In the more modest dwellings of Gladstone Rd staff with these roles tended to live in neighbouring terraced properties: Marr Terrace, for example. Whether residential or not, coachman and chauffeurs might build up a personal relationship with employers as they conducted them safely and in some style down the public thoroughfares into the industrial workplace. In 1873 Henry Wilkinson, the exceptionally generous steel manufacturer, left his coachman William £5, just over a month's wages 'with all the clothes he has worn while in my service' - a reminder of the significant cost to servants of their smart uniforms, most of which were bought in instalments from their employers. A non-residential male servant had the additional privilege of being allowed to marry.

Samuel Earnshaw Howell No.14

Samuel Earnshaw Howell 44 b Sheffield
Steel manufacturer Master Cutler 1888
Ellen Howell 35 b Sheffield
5 children: 1-11

Domestic Staff

Adelaide E Newnham 22 Governess Leicestershire
Elizabeth Ryder 44 Nurse domestic Leicestershire
Mary E Grice 20 Cook Leicestershire
Susan E Frowling 22 Housemaid Sheffield
Annie Webster 18 Housemaid Scarborough



Samuel Howell at 14 Gladstone Rd employed more residential servants than anyone else in Gladstone Road - five women. He was a very successful steel manufacturer - Master Cutler in 1888. His chauffeur, Harry Colbourn, lived with his family in a coach-house at number 11 Gladstone Road. It was Colbourn who, in 1925, was left a legacy in Howell's will - £100. Unlike Howell's female servants, Colbourn's service was longstanding. The tenure of a female domestic was usually very short. Most are recorded as aged between 17 and 29 and do not appear in the next Census by which time they have been replaced by another girl or young woman. Colbourn, on the other hand, established a relationship with his master over roughly 40 years: firstly in the car on the way to the works and then as Howell's gardener. Together they would have discussed aspects of horticultural design which might impress guests such as the Shah of Persia whom Howell had hosted at the request of the government.

Gardeners served the social ambition of an employer but they were hard to find in late nineteenth century Sheffield. Richly gardened suburbs were a recent introduction. The gardeners in villas such as Gladstone Road's were all recruited from quite distant parts of the country but not usually from the

impoverished agricultural districts from which so many female staff were recruited. Gardeners would have to have worked in fairly large establishments to have acquired their specialist skills. They moved on to improve themselves rather than out of desperation. The gardener at Riverdale House came from Wiltshire, and the gardener at Oakbrook from Ireland, presumably a landed estate, not the poverty-stricken countryside. Henry Steel's gardener, Alfred Edwards, trained in the orchid houses of Baron Rothschild's Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire.

The female staff who could acquire some sort of permanence and influence were the cooks. In grand houses at this period they tended to get paid twice the rate of pay for an upper housemaid. Both types of servant would also have had their food paid for. In a villa like Howell's a cook's pay would probably have been over £1 a week, comparable to that of a skilled stone mason. She also had the right to 'perquisites' or perks, for example the right to sell on her own behalf the dripping from the roast to passing tradesmen.

Howell's cook was Mary E Grice, from a village in Leicestershire. But Mary was young for a cook in a large household - only 20. Ten years later she has been replaced by another 20-year-old. This is unusual for a cook. Cooks tended to be older than 20 and to last longer. Ellen Howell, the mistress of the house, did not herself grow up in a house with a large staff and certainly never in a household with a designated cook. Though her father was a reasonably prosperous steel manufacturer, he died when she was in her teens. She was taken in by her uncle, the draper John Cole, who before the success of Cole Brothers employed only one general servant. As a fostered teenager she might well have done much of the cooking herself. Even as wife of a Master Cutler in the 1890s, it is not impossible it was she rather than the 20-year-old cook who managed the kitchen. Pamela Horn, the principal historian of the English servant, suggests it was relatively common in the north of England for the mistress of the house to work alongside servants. In Surrey this practice was rather looked down on. Julie Banham's fascinating article on the management of Sir John Brown's opulent Endcliffe Hall points out that in the mid-nineteenth century there was less distinction between the employer and employed in Sheffield than in other industrial cities. She describes Sheffield's as an 'impolite society' confined by relatively fewer social codes than in other industrial cities.

It is interesting to compare the pattern of employment in the Howell household with that of its near neighbour, James Dixon at number 7 Gladstone Road. Both Dixon and Howell were successful steel manufacturers - both had been Master Cutlers. Dixon in 1887, the year before Howell. Dixon and Howell were the only two householders to employ four or more servants.

Howell's staff of five included three servants from Leicestershire - a children's nurse, a cook, and a governess - and then two housemaids from Yorkshire. He was the only householder in Gladstone Road to employ a governess who was, rather predictably, the daughter of a vicar. A governess was bound to be socially isolated: of a different educational background to the staff maintaining the home but inferior in economic status to her employers. Dixon lived in the biggest house in the road, Tylecote, and had a staff of four.

With younger children the Dixons had no governess but employed both a senior children's nurse and an under nurse. In addition, they had two servants, both from Lincolnshire. As with the Howells there is a preference for servants who come from a remote agricultural area, in this case Lincolnshire rather than Leicestershire. If there were a team of servants, the specialist staff would tend to have been recruited from rural areas and the most junior from Sheffield. Edith Dixon's father was a solicitor rather than an industrialist. This did not necessarily mean her family of origin could have afforded a skilled cook but her relationship with her cook must have been different from Ellen Howell's because of her cook's greater maturity and acquired skills.

Fanny North was 29 in 1891 and she was the Dixons' cook until well into her 30s. It is unusual to be able to track the life of a female employee after she reaches the age of about 30 and is replaced by a younger model. If a woman left service to get married it is not always easy to identify her on the

marriage certificate. The occupation of the bride, unlike that of the groom, is not recorded. But Peter Warr concluded from his examination of St John's marriage records that about 20% of the brides married in St John's between the beginning of 1880 and the end of 1899 were servants in the area. Some of these women married men with a connection to a local residence: coachmen, gardeners, dairymen, boot repairers and stone masons for example. But some young women had never lost their links with their often-distant families of origin and home. Fanny North, Dixon's cook, in her late 30s returned to her family in north Lincolnshire, married a grocer, the couple finding a room in the house of Fanny's father, still a farm labourer. The fact that Fanny was able to find a husband back home might well have had something to do with the fact she **was** a cook. A girl who had acquired the skills of a cook or housekeeper would have added attractions to a prospective suitor. These skills would also increase her chances of remaining in domestic employment, perhaps until her 50s.

In tracing the footsteps of servants, we lack first hand memoirs or diaries. The only one that has come into my hands, thanks to the generosity of his grandson, is the invaluable memoir of Henry Steel's gardener, Alfred Edwards.

Sally Eales, an historian based in Sheffield University, aimed to base her thesis on domestic labour on such firsthand documents. After a six-month hunt through the archives of Britain's stately homes, she came up with only 16. The fact that the records of servants are more likely to be preserved if they worked in a very grand house further skews our sense of how the majority of servants lived.

In my next blog I compare the huge variety of employment patterns of the smaller households of Gladstone Road.

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