Scissors Paper Stone

Blog 38:

From Louth to Gladstone Rd: Why Louth?

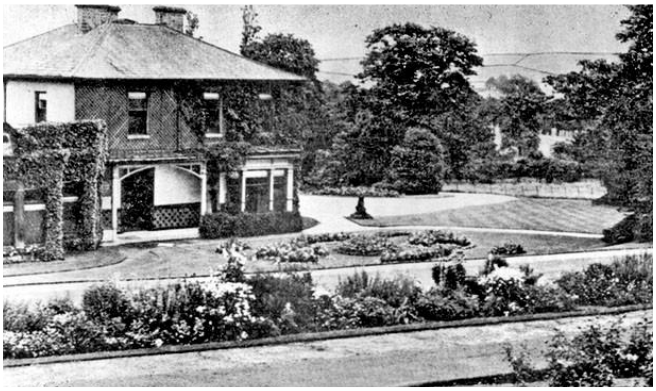
Part III

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

The agricultural depression of the late nineteenth century caused the migration of men into the industries of northern cities and of women into domestic service. Fanny North's father is recorded as a labourer in the coastal village of Saltfleetby, Lincolnshire in the 1971 Census. As agricultural work shrunk, his daughters would have to travel to find work. Fanny would probably have found her Sheffield berth through one of the servant registries of the relatively bustling market town of Louth in the centre of Lincolnshire. Though Fanny appears to have found her sister Eunice a job in Graham Road after she had established herself, most rural girls owed their jobs to a servant registry offices.

But how did Fanny acquire the skills which would have enabled her to apply for a skilled job in the prosperous Dixon household? At the age of 18 or 19 she had a lucky break by finding a job on the large farm of George Cox who farmed 600 acres in Burwell ten mile south west of Saltfleetby. Cox employed 10 men and a boy and three domestic servants. His foreman was also from Saltfleetby so it is possible Fanny owed her position to his influence. Though not grand, a large farm would have had numerous employees, the domestic roles clearly differentiated. Manor Farm seems to have been a good training environment. The cook herself was only a few years older than Fanny and the farmer's wife would have trained her domestic staff. Over and again, an impoverished girl who flourishes did so because of the happy accident of a nurturing mentor.

These legacies of life-changing kindness are illustrated by the life of the remarkable Sheffield servant, Emma Wardley. I include her story here because it is so unusual to have a written account of a servant's life. It's Muck or Nettles is written by two of Emma's grandchildren.



Thorpe House Norton Lees. Image credit Picture Sheffield.

Emma Wardley had been in service since the age of 11. During the last decade of the nineteenth century and in her early 20s she became the cook at Thorpe House in Norton Lees, larger than any house in Gladstone Rd. Her kindness to the maid who became her successor as cook in this large and well-established household was repaid at a crucial time. Marrying Isaac Wardley, a gifted but heavy-drinking stone mason working on Thorpe House, Emma found herself, in 1908, after the birth of her sixth son, almost destitute. The mistress of Thorpe House had founded a tradition of giving past employees food parcels on the birth of a baby. Ranmoor, a more recently established suburb than the historic village of Norton, was unlikely to have such a culture of almost feudal benevolence. Emma sent her eldest son, Albert, up the hill from Abbeydale to the big house in Norton to request help. The boy was met by the maid whom Emma had protected and befriended. She was now in charge of the kitchen. She fed Albert, and piled food on his back: tea, flour, sugar, lard, butter, cheese, a block of dried dates, two rabbits, a piece of ham and a few big bars of carbolic soap. The currency of kindness, and perhaps a legacy from feudal traditions of patronage, was a temporary substitute for job security or a pension.

Returning to the North sisters we might ask why Sheffield industrialists looked so far afield for their domestic staff when the families of Sheffield grinder would have had daughters in abundance.

This advertisement in the pages of the 1899 edition of the Louth and North Lincolnshire Advertiser gives us clues why this should have been so. It is an advertisement not for a cook but for a very junior servant.

Adverts like this can be found all over the local papers of rural Britain.

'Country Girl Preferred'

Louth and North Lincolnshire Advertiser Saturday July 13th 1889

The General Register Office for Servants of All Classes 41 Eastgate

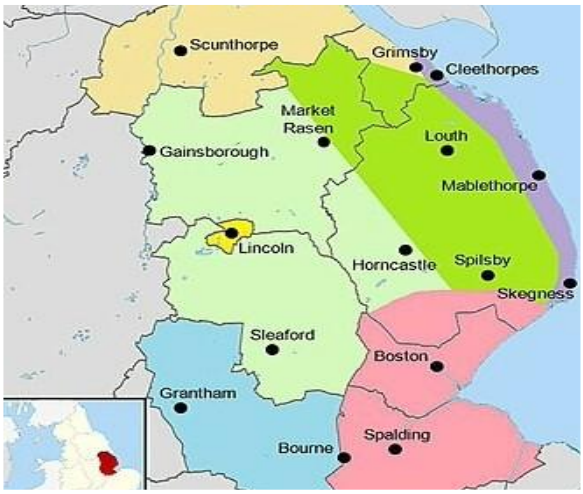
Wanted, a General Servant, the washing put out

Wanted, at once, a young GIRL, first going out; to attend to children, do house work. Country girl preferred

Wanted. Queensland, Australia, Free Passage Given. Single Farm labourers, female domestic servants

There were many reasons for such preference. Country girls were probably in better health, enjoying clean air and fresh food. They were also linked more closely than city girls to feudal patterns of deference to the local gentry. And, I am afraid to say, by removing them from the protection of fathers and brothers they were easier to exploit. There are clues in this short advertisement of the appeal to employers of the inexperience of a housemaid. It would be desirable if this was a girl's 'first going out' so she would have little expectation of what might be a reasonable workload. And many of these girls were very young, some as young as 13.

Just how remote these girls could be from family support is illustrated by this map identifying some of the Lincolnshire villages from which servants had been recruited to work in Gladstone Road in 1891.



Saltfleetby: Fanny North [Louth 7 miles]
Driby: Emily Hanton No7 [Louth 8 miles]
Cowbit: Sarah Marsh No 8 [Spalding 3 miles]

There were three Lincolnshire girls, two of them at Tylecote: Fanny and a housemaid, the 25-year-old Emily Hanton. Emily was from a more prosperous background than Fanny. Though Emily's father is described as a farmer rather than a labourer, he had so many children that Emily would have had to make her own way. The third Lincolnshire girl was Sarah Marsh at No 8, near Spalding, another market town. She is ambiguously described as a Servant/Helper and is, most unusually aged 37. Unfortunately, there are so many women named Sarah Marsh in the Census records that I cannot track her origins – a problem when attempting to recover traces of housemaids with commonly recurring names.

What do the recruitment processes by which girls like Fanny found herself in Sheffield tell us about the expectations of young country girls as they moved from the remote fenlands into domestic service in our industrial cities? Though domestic service was by far the biggest source of female employment in Britain at this period, it was rarely seen as attractive to young women who had other options. Working in a textile mill in the north Pennines was better paid, more convivial, and free of the indignities of domestic labour. Probably of no interest to textile factory owners in Bradford, the farming background of Fanny and other Lincolnshire girls was, was however, a marketable asset to employers of domestic labour.

The vulnerability of the 'country girl preferred'

Fanny was fortunate in that she moved to Sheffield to a job that actually existed. There were servant registries up and down the country which were in fact agencies for city brothels. So great was the

problem that charitable agencies were set up to try to protect these vulnerable girls and in 1907 an Act was passed to regulate them, though local authorities often failed to comply.



Paradise Square from 'The Star' 14 July 2024 shows numbers 10 and 11, the House of Help was number 1.

The Sheffield House of Help for Friendless Girls was set up in 1880s by one of St John's pew renters, Phebe Flather whose generosity to her servant Lily I have already mentioned. Phebe lived at the turn of the century at The Elms in Gladstone Rd. She has the distinction of leaving bequests to servants regardless of their rank, who had been in her service for two years. Phebe was a superb organiser with a genius for attracting funding for the servants she protected. Edgar Allen, one of Sheffield's great philanthropists remembered the Home in his will.

In the House of Help in Paradise Square, girls as young as 11 or 12 were not only rescued from exploitation: they were also given training that would make them eligible for safe employment.

Members of staff and the police used regularly to meet the trains from the countryside to shepherd girls who had been lured by false advertisements designed to lead them into the clutches of predators.

It was a great shock when reading through the list of girls admitted to the House of Help in 1891 to find that the two youngest girls, aged 8 and 9 were, in fact, from Ranmoor. Both Esther and Elizabeth Mason were christened in St John's Church. Yet living in this relatively safe neighbourhood did not protect them from the tragedy of what was joint parental abuse. Their father was a gardener from Liverpool and their mother was from Leicestershire.

The judge who convicted the parents was clearly horrified and sentenced the father to twelve months hard labour.

The parents of these two girls were part of a transient, inevitably fragmented community of those employed as domestic staff, in Alfred Mason's case a gardener. Such employment meant that servants were uprooted from the environments in which they had grown up, to find themselves amongst strangers. Not only were housemaids at risk because of the distance from their families of origin, distance from established family networks left incoming parents unsupported and children often unprotected.

The history of the House of Help shows that overwhelmingly the threat to the safety of young servants was the poverty of the families from which they came. Once a daughter had been trained and put into service, the parents would often appear at the House of Help and claim a cut of their daughter's wages. Phebe Flather and her fellow Trustees became expert in protecting the whereabouts of the girls for whom they had found jobs. Fanny North and Lily Cushion in contrast to such girls had families, not rich but secure enough to offer them shelter when they were too old for domestic work.

The heyday of Ranmoor was short-lived: the 1870s to the outbreak of the First World War. Between the wars the number of family homes declined, many houses being turned into institutions: hostels for nurses, institutions for the blind.

It is important to record that domestic service though often oppressive could also open up unexpected opportunities. I am grateful to Anthony and Kathryn Riddle who led me to Ferdinand Mount's book

Kiss myself Goodbye. I will not reveal the final twist in this extraordinary memoir about a servant in Ranmoor but do read the book. It demonstrates how servitude can be transformed into power.

In a less spectacular way, my book on Sheffield reading between the wars demonstrates how, despite insecure and punishing working conditions, Victorian and Edwardian servants often gained new perspectives on the world which transformed their lives. Four of the 65 people interviewed for Steel City Readers describe how attitudes to reading and education could be changed by being in service. My favourite story is of the Sheffield 'tweenie' (working between the kitchen below and the drawing room above) who got into big trouble with her line manager, the housekeeper of the vicar of St John's Park. The housekeeper whom Jessie Robinson described as 'a proper giant to me' caught the tweenie reading The Times newspaper on the vicar's desk.

'A girl of your station does not read the London paper' thundered the housekeeper. She insisted the novels of Dickens' were more appropriate for working class girls and directed Jessie to the set in the kitchen. From then on Dickens was a favourite and Jessie's love of reading was born. When I interviewed her in her flat not far from Park vicarage, she was surrounded by pictures of her grandchildren, all in their graduation gowns and all of them with a love of reading equal to their grandmother's.



Photo of Frank Burgin and his mother in 1952, courtesy of the family.

Frank Burgin, the son of a miner from Mosborough, described to Loveday Herridge how his mother's experience of domestic service had led her to associate reading and education with economic prosperity. Her son Frank, was the only one of the 65 people we interviewed to gain a PhD.

This study has been built on records explored by me and many others. I am hugely grateful to Sharon Forde and the Ranmoor Society for loaning me St John's marriage registers, to Keith Pitchforth from the Fulwood History Society for sharing his ongoing research on gardeners and for setting me off in my compilation of a database of Ranmoor's servants. Sue Turner, Val Hewson, Sue Roe and Alan Crutch have all shared relevant research. I am delighted that Scissors Paper Stone has not only inspired researchers but that our research is being picked up by relatives of the people whose lives we are making known through our talks and on our blog posts.

Mary Grover
26 October 2026