

# Low Incomes/Hard Conditions for Victorian Servants

The life of a Victorian servant was unbelievably hard. However many considered themselves lucky to have food to eat and a roof over their heads regardless of the pay. They had a perspective born from a desperate need for survival and this went a long way toward sustaining them. Additionally, many began service at very young ages and were conditioned to accept this as the natural order of things.

Servants were recruited to the lowest positions in large houses at very young ages – perhaps as low as 8-10 years of age. Having served in a larger house, servants might then be recruited to smaller houses with fewer servants often 30-50 miles from their home. This distance was preferred as it was felt that they would be less inclined to spread gossip about the family, less inclined to be pestered by suitors and less likely to run off home. Servants were often recruited from rural backgrounds as they were seen as more manageable, more adaptable and harder working than urban children.

People wonder how servants could live on such small incomes listed below. Even when the value of room, board and clothes are included, these salaries still represent a poverty existence by today's standards. Partly, they were able to survive because their lives were so simple – they had no car loans or mortgages to pay off, no insurances, no telephone, electricity, gas, water or council tax bills so that they did not require as much. Additionally, with the typical work schedule being sixteen hours a day, seven days a week, they did not have much time to spend their income on entertainment ... of which there was very little anyway.

While such conditions may seem dreadful to us today, it must be remembered that the work ethic was completely different 100 years ago. Today, the mindset is that people work mainly to get ahead in the world and to pay for their homes, possessions and activities that bring them pleasure or satisfaction. In Victorian Britain, people worked to survive. Without any form of social security, if people failed to earn a salary, they starved to death, froze to death in winter or died of disease. There was no safety net to catch people if they lost their job and no state or company pensions to fund their retirement.

## The Hierarchy of Victorian Servants

### Land Steward

Responsible for managing the farms, collecting rents and undertaking all those activities associated with making the estate profitable. This would be a highly-educated gentleman who was regarded not as a servant but a professional employee with a status higher than the family lawyer. In addition to an annual salary of £100-£300 (£6000-£18000) they would have a private house on the estate.

### House Steward

Responsible for all purchasing, hiring, firing and paying the servant staff. They would not be considered a servant but a professional man like a lawyer. £50-£100 (£3000-£6000) per year.

## Upper Staff

### **Butler**

The highest ranking official servant. Responsible for running the house. £40-£60 (£2400-£3600) per year. He also received considerable "gratuity" money from merchants selling goods to maintain the house. In smaller estates the butler assumed the house steward's responsibilities.

### **Housekeeper**

Responsible for the female staff and maintaining the house's furnishings. Her salary was usually £5-£10 less than the butler's (£2100-£2400) per year.

### **Cook or Chef**

In charge of the kitchen staff and responsible for preparing the family's meals. An under cook would prepare meals for him and the staff. Food quality was an important way to impress guests so chefs often earned more than butlers even though they ranked below them. A cook for a modest house might only make £30 (£1800) per year while a famous chef for a royal family might earn as much as £300 (£18000)

### **Lady's Maid and Valet**

Their main job was to be a private servant for the lady or master of the house assisting them with dressing, caring for their clothes, being a general companion and even performing secretarial duties. They were hired by the Lady and Master of the house rather than by the butler, housekeeper or house steward. Typical salaries were £20-30 (£1000-£1800) per year.

## Lower Staff

### **First Footman**

Next in line to replace the butler. His main job was to be tall, handsome and represent the estate's grandeur. He accompanied the lady of the house on shopping expeditions, served the family meals and assisted the butler in his duties. His responsibility did not include heavy work such as carrying coal or water. These tasks were left to the female staff. His salary was around £30 (£1800) per year. Many footman's salaries were based on how tall they were rather than how well they did their work. The taller and more impressive they were, the more they received. Their income was supplemented by £5-15 (£300-£900) per year in tips and other gifts from lady of the house.

### **Second Footman**

Similar to the first footman but in more of an apprenticeship role. They earned £25 (£1500) per year. Premium salaries were paid to a pair of first and second footman whose size and appearance made them look like twins. The idea was that they were most impressive if they matched like book ends!

### **Head Nurse**

In charge of the nursing staff in houses with several nurses. Many of these nurses, charged with watching over young children, were themselves only 12-14 years old. Head nurses earned £25 (£1500) per year.

### **Footman**

Additional male staff for opening doors, waiting at table, assisting gentleman or

accompanying ladies as needed. £20 (£1000) per year.

### **Chamber Maids**

Responsible for cleaning bedrooms. £20 (£1000) per year. They were considered slightly higher than parlour maids because chamber maids were in more intimate contact with the family or at least the remnants of their presence.

### **Parlour Maids**

Responsible for cleaning and maintaining the sitting rooms, drawing rooms of the house. £20 (£1000) per year.

### **House Maid**

General purpose worker. £16 (£960) per year

### **Between Maid**

Worked in either the house or the kitchen as needed. £15 (£900) per year.

### **Nurse**

Responsible for raising the babies and young children of the house. £10-£15 (£500-£900) per year depending on age and ability. They were often very young – possibly as young as 10 years old. In the 1871 census almost 20% of nurses in full time domestic service were under the age of 15. There were also 710 girls listed as being employed as nurses under the age of 10 years old.

### **Under Cook**

Apprentice to the chef. Prepared meals for the staff. Worked for low wages to work his way up to a full chef's job. £15 (£900) per year.

### **Kitchen Maid**

Assisted in kitchen work. £15 (£900) per year.

### **Scullery Maid**

Dish washer. £13 (£780) per year

### **Laundry Maid**

Washing and ironing. £13 (£780) per year.

### **Page or Tea Boy**

Apprentice footman. Typically 10 to 16 years old. Earned £8-£16 (£480-£960) per year depending on age, height, appearance and abilities.

### **Head Groom or Stable Master**

Responsible for running the stables. While their position might rank as upper staff, because they were not part of the inside staff they did not have their privileges. However, as master of their own staff they undoubtedly occupied a similar status. Earned £30-£50 (£1800-£3000) per year.

### **Groom**

Cared for horses: grooming, saddling, etc. Earned £15 (£900) per year.

### **Stable Boy**

Cleaned stables and etc. Earned £6-£12 (£360-£720) per year depending on age and

ability. Often started when they were only 10 years of age.

### **Head Gardener**

Like the head groom the head gardener was management and therefore upper staff, yet their position as working outside the house prohibited them from occupying a position among the house's upper servants. Also like the stable master their position of authority had its compensations. Because a grand estate's grounds were as important for impressing guests as the chef's skill, the head gardener could earn a very high wage, as much as £120 (£7200) per year.

### **Game Keeper**

Responsible for maintaining the bird population of the estate so that the Master and guests would have game birds, such as pheasant, to hunt. Earned £30-£50 (£1800-£3000) per year.

### **Grounds Keepers**

The general labourers under the head gardener. They would do everything from planting trees to cutting grass. Earned £8-£16 (£480-£960) per year depending on age and ability.

### **Governess**

The governess has to be listed under a separate category because they existed in a kind of social limbo. Typically they were the unmarried daughters of gentlemen who, for one reason or another, had to go into service to support themselves. Because they officially belonged to the genteel class, it would be unspeakable for them to accept service as a maid. As a governess they were able to make use of their education and, in theory, retain a little of their dignity.

In reality their lives were miserable. They were looked down on by the family of the house as coming from a failed family. Equally, the staff looked down on them because they were seen to represent hypocrisy – they worked for wages like any servant yet were supposed to be genteel. Their job was to care for the teenage girls of the family – teenage males were sent off to boarding school. Their salaries were £25 (£1500) per year. References do not show clearly whether they were considered upper or lower staff. However, in films, governesses are shown walking through the front door and assuming a higher status than that of house servants. However, these portrayals are not consistent with the lives described in the references of the day.

### **Gate Keeper**

This is another servant hard to categorise. Their job was to guard the main entrance to the estate and often lived in a small house attached to the gate. Yet they would be classed as unskilled labour and as such would occupy a low position on the servant's hierarchy and receive a commensurately low salary, perhaps as little as £10 (£600) per year.

### **An example of rules for Victorian servants**

- 1. When being spoken to, stand still, keeping your hands quiet and always look at the person speaking.*
- 2. Never let your voice be heard by the ladies and gentlemen of the household unless they have spoken directly to you a question or statement which requires a response, at which time speak as little as possible.*
- 3. In the presence of your mistress, never speak to another servant or person of your own rank or to a child unless only for necessity and then as little as possible and as quietly as possible.*
- 4. Never begin to talk to the ladies or gentlemen unless to deliver a message or to ask a necessary question and then do it in as few words as possible.*
- 5. Whenever possible, items that have been dropped, such as spectacles or handkerchiefs and other small items should be returned to their owners on a salver*
- 6. Always respond when you have received an order and always use the proper address: "Sir", "Ma'am", "Miss" or "Mrs" as the case may be.*
- 7. Never offer your opinion to your employer.*

8. Always "give room": that is, if you encounter one of your betters in the house or on the stairs, you are to make yourself as invisible as possible, turning yourself toward the wall and averting your eyes.
9. Except in reply to a salutation offered, never say "good morning" or "goodnight" to your employer.
10. If you are required to walk with a lady or gentleman in order to carry packages or for any other reason, always keep a few paces back.
11. You are expected to be punctual to your place at mealtime.
12. You shall not receive any Relative, Visitor or Friend into the house nor shall you introduce any person into the Servant's Hall without the consent of the Butler or Housekeeper.
13. Followers are strictly forbidden. Any member of the female staff who is found to be fraternising shall be immediately dismissed.
14. Expect that any breakages or damages in the house shall be deducted from your wages.