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WOMEN DOMESTIC SERVANTS 1919-1939

A study of a hidden Army, illustrated
by servants' own recollected experiences.

by

PAM TAYLOR

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given at Ruskin History Workshop,
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between the Wars".

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Women make their own history but they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. A slightly altered quotation from Marx (he refers to Men) which highlights the experience of an army of women between the two World Wars. I call them an Army because they entered as young recruits and were trained to accept their place in structured hierarchy. Despite strong internal resistances and reservations, they accepted the discipline, on the whole, without question.

In spite of changes in the economy and some enlargement in the range of jobs open to women, large numbers remained in domestic service till 1939. Attitudes of employers, hours and conditions of work seem to me to have changed surprisingly little from Pre-war or even 19th Century days.

Robert Roberts¹ in *The Classic Slum* and John Burnett² in *Useful Toil* suggest that domestic service as an institution and major employer of women, started to decline after World War I. It is true that many women entered Industry and the Services during the First World War and consequently servant numbers declined between the 1911 and the 1921 censuses. But they declined from approximately 1.3 million to 1.1 million and by 1931 they had increased again to 1.3 million. There was no Census taken in 1941 but I think it reasonable to assume that numbers could have increased further between 1931-1939. See App. I.

For the Inter-War years, therefore, numbers of women "in Service" remained very high and domestic service was still the largest single category of women's employment.

My study aimed, primarily, to find out how servants themselves viewed their work and life experience: but in the course of my work I became very interested in how employers created and maintained a tight control over work and indeed, our life itself. How did servants respond to this treatment? Why, on the whole, did they acquiesce in the control?

My main evidence comes from about 20 accounts of domestic service and is of three kinds: Published autobiographies, accounts written specially for me and (the largest proportion) oral evidence gleaned in fairly long interviews with 12 women in 1972. They had been in service mainly between 1916 and 1940: Their jobs cover a wide range of geographical

(1) Robert Roberts. *The Classic Slum*; Penguin.

(2) John Burnett. *Useful Toil*; Penguin

areas and types of employer. Over 70 actual situations were covered. My text will be illustrated with quotations which are from these three kinds of evidence: they will all therefore be in the women's own language.

Until 1939 then, there was a very large number of girls and women in this peculiar industry with low pay, low status, long hours and no legislation protecting them. With contraction of heavy industry after 1920 and decline in the depressed areas, there was high unemployment. Returning soldiers needed jobs and where women had been exhorted to work in industry and the services during the war, they were urged or compelled to get out and make way for men after the war. My mother worked as a commercial traveller during the war but she regarded it as "keeping a man's job going for him". As Britain was recovering from the 1920s slump, the world trade recession made its impact in 1929. Unemployment, never below 1 million in the 1920's reached 2.5 million in 1930. In January 1939 it was 2 million. The overall unemployment rate in 1930 was 19.9% of the insured work force but this varied regionally being low in the South East and Midlands and high in the North East and North West and very high in South Wales - 31%. Wages generally during the period were static or being statutorily reduced. Food prices fell, which is a factor that made it possible for families not affected by the slump to feed servants. Mowatt¹ refers to the two Englands of the inter war years - prosperity in the expanding South East and Midlands. Chronic depression in the North and South Wales. Some of the newly prosperous were able to employ a servant for the first time because of the large number of girls and women available. In other words women from the depressed areas were forced by poverty to go into service as it both gave them a home with board and lodging and relieved the family of the burden of keeping them.

Surveys in the 1930's by John Boyd Orr and by the BMA² revealed that 30%-35% of the population or 8 million families were under-nourished: moreover this was due not only to unemployment but to low pay for those actually in work.

Against this background it is easy to see why women and girls were still glad to have the refuge of domestic service. Other jobs were fiercely competed for. In 1931, 5000 applications were received by a Birmingham

(1) C.L. Mowatt. Britain Between the Wars

(2) In John Burnett, Plenty and Want; Penguin Books

Drapery store for 50 vacancies¹. Orwell² in Coming Up for Air mentions the girl in Woolworths who dare not answer back for fear of getting the sack. Unemployment affected those in work for they knew they could easily be replaced. Girls from overcrowded families with the father either unemployed or on low pay could help the family by moving out into service and perhaps sending a little money home from their wages. Living in domestic service did in some ways provide benefits - it was sheltered supervised employment. Parents knew their daughters would have board, lodging and a small wage - young girls could not have left home for any other job. So although conditions sounded prison like (and to some girls seemed prison like) there was a certain safety and security. Most women I heard from were well fed and some felt distress that they could not share food with their families.

Life was comfortable in my College Hall job. My only pangs came when I scraped out all the custard, with pudding and gravies that were left in the cooking utensils after dishing up. If only, by some magic means, I could send them home.

Winifred Foley, A Child in the Forest.

HOME BACKGROUND

All the women I heard from seem to have been brought up strictly but with affection. They were usually from a big family and understood that money was short and life a struggle.

My childhood was happy but there was an undercurrent of tension; an inability on my mother's part to manage financially; as the eldest child, this fear communicated itself to me. (3)

Life was wonderful except for one constant nagging irritation; HUNGER We knew the wages Dad brought home from the pit were not enough to keep us out of debt, let alone fill our bellies properly. (4)

(1) The Times, 1931

(2) George Orwell, Coming Up for Air; Penguin Books

(3) Lilian Cross, South Wales 1920's

(4) Winifred Foley, Forest of Dean 1920's

On the whole children accepted parental discipline and girls, anyway, rarely rebelled. If their parents' actions seemed hard, children did not seem to resent this. Parents had to be hard. That's how life was. It seems though that, a hard life and few luxuries could be borne if the children were loved. But if later, in service, girls were worked hard without any kindness being shown, then life to a girl away from home and family could seem grim and miserable.

Nearly all the girls were advised or guided into their first job by parents who sometimes had rather rosy ideas of what life would be like. This is Mrs. Doris Grayson who left South Wales in 1929 for London though she had been to a Grammar School.

I really can't imagine what I expected. I only know that my first place was a dreadful shock to me. The advert said "Lady's Help". My mother, who's been a Lady's maid before her marriage was under the impression I would be trained in that kind of work and would travel with the family, as she had done. We were completely misled. I was the only servant kept. I was paid 6/- a week. I felt as though I were in prison.

(1)

Jobs were very roughly of two kinds and the job satisfaction was related to this division. In the country, girls would be taken on by the local "Big House". The fact that the girls' family and the employer lived in the same community gave some guarantee that employers would show some responsibility towards the servant. Three of my respondents fell in this category. But another factor here was that work itself might be less onerous because shared with other servants and, an important point, there would be companionship.

(1) Doris Grayson on leaving South Wales for London.

I was working in the village shop you see (in 1929) from 7.30 a.m. to 6.30 p.m. for 2/6d a week and I had three meals a day because I was delicate.... I went to school with the butler's daughter and Major and Mrs. Evans were coming back from abroad. He'd got to engage three young girls; kitchen maid, under housemaid and parlour maid. He came down to see my mother while I was at work and I said "Well I wasn't going to be a kitchen maid". I'd asked for a rise at the shop and she couldn't afford another 6d a week. So Mr. Somersale, the butler, said "Will you come and work with me as parlourmaid?" I said "What will I have to do?" and he said "Wait at table and clean silver and look after the Major's clothes" I would get 10/- a week and my own bedroom.

(1)

But girls in towns and depressed areas especially after 1929, had to travel longer distances and used newspaper advertisements and agencies. A girl from Wednesbury in the Black Country working in Moseley, a suburb of Birmingham, though not a great distance from home, obtained the job through an agency and spent a large part of her half day travelling in order to have a few hours at home. Girls from South Wales working in London could not afford the fare home for perhaps nine months or a year.

I stayed in my first place nine months. I had saved enough money to pay my fare home and I longed to see my mother, brothers and sisters.

(2)

If a girl got a post far from home the train fare was sometimes an advance but had to be repaid in weekly installments out of a low wage. This is so in the following extract which is from Winifred Foley's book A Child in the Forest. It illustrates both the concern of a young girl to help the family financially and her distress at leaving her poor but loved family in the Forest of Dean to go to a job in London. It starts with Poll's father talking to her. She was 14 and the year was 1928.

(1) Florence Follett in a Northants village.

(2) Doris Grayson of her job in London.

"Now I don't have to tell thee 'ow much your mam and I wish we could kip thee at 'ome. We don't worry about thee being a good wench. We know thee won'tst do anything to let thy old mam and dad down. Our worry is that the job might be no good. Now mind what I do say: if they do work thee too hard or not give thee enough vittles, or be bad to thee in any way, thee drop us a line and we'll scrape the money up somehow to get thee 'ome..... A year do seem a long way at thy age and it'll seem a long time to we at 'ome but just you think of the excitement when we all come to the station to meet thee".

I had thought that this journey to the station would be exciting too, all those weeks ago when the pound came from Mrs. Fox for my fare, but as I walked behind Mam and my brother I could only think about Mam's shoes and how they were down-trodden and worn out completely on one side. Her shapeless lisle stockings hung in loose folds round her thin ankles. Perhaps my new mistress would give me some left off clothes to send home, as some of my Aunties used to for Granny. I noticed too, the thin knobbly legs of my brother emerging like matchsticks from the legs of his patched trousers, and I remembered a time when he'd fainted and gone into a coma. Dad had run, like one gone mad, for the doctor. When the doctor came he said something about malnutrition, and I look it up in the dictionary at school. Under nourished, thats what it meant. Well, now I would be able to do something about it. Surely I could send home at least a shilling a week; that would pay for three extra loaves. Perhaps I could send more when I had repaid the pound.

On we went up the slope by Nelson's Green and in a moment we should be able to see the station. Oh, if only some magic act had made it disappear! No, it was there. And so, miraculously, was Dad. There he was emerging from a side track on to our path. His face was grey with fatigue and smudged with pit dirt embedded in the wrinkles, but his eyes shone with pleasure as I ran up to him delighted with the surprise. He was sweating, for he'd made a long and hurried detour. Oh what a lucky girl I felt to be so loved. Full of pride and misery, of good intentions and fear of what was in store, full of overwhelming love for everyone and everything I was leaving behind. I stood bemused watching the train chug to a halt. The little platform became the edge of the world, the world I had known as a child in the forest.

(1)

WORK, WAGES, TIME OFF

It is very difficult to generalise about work because it varied enormously according to the number of servants kept, type of household and employers: a large number of servants meant a division of labour and perhaps less work for the individual. Florence Follett, was a parlourmaid/valet for the Major and did no dirty work. However the kitchen maid at the bottom of the multi servant hierarchy did get all the dirty jobs, low pay and low status. Margaret Powell as a kitchen maid looked scruffy and was shoo-ed out of the kitchen if "Madam" came down.

No one considered that the reason the kitchen looked so clean, the pans shining was the reason I was so scruffy. (1)

The single servant could be very hard worked - she was expected to do many of the jobs which would be divided up to a larger household and even had to have two sets of uniform. In the afternoon the maid would change out of coloured cotton dress and white cotton apron - into a black dress and white decorative apron and cap. If visitors called the uniformed maid was a sign of prestige. All the girls had work to do before breakfast and would rise at least an hour before the household. Such jobs as sweeping the front step, cleaning the brass door knocker, cleaning out and lighting fires, getting the kitchen range going - all had to be done before any food was taken. If it was a three storey house a lot of carrying of coals, ashes, food and dirty dishes was involved. Before the day of electric household appliances, cleaning was laborious, difficult, frequent and ineffecient. Most methods of sweeping raised and distributed dust. Carpets and soft furnishings were in use decades before any efficient means of cleaning were available. My evidence quotes damp tea leaves sprinkled on carpets before sweeping to prevent the dust rising.

Use of electric vacuum cleaners, fridges, irons, washing machines, was not common for long after electricity was available. Many houses had gas lighting and conversion to electricity was expensive (our family did not have a house with electricity in it till 1934). Fred Archer² in "A Lad of Evesham Vale" mentions the excitement in his village when the whole village was wired for

(1) Margaret Powell, Below Stairs, Pan Books

(2) Fred Archer, A Lad of Evesham Vale

electricity also in 1934. "So the cottagers changed from mutton tallow candles to paraffin and now "we be on the 'lectric".

Open fires and a smokey atmosphere outside (no clean air legislation) meant everything got much more dirty than now and cleaning, clothes-washing, clothes-drying and spring cleaning were long and tiring tasks. Many employers quoted by my servant employed a "woman for washing" and Gladys Evans was promised when she took a job as a single handed maid that "a woman would come in to do the washing". This woman never materialised and Gladys did the washing, wringing, drying and ironing for an extra 6d a week.¹ Many married women went out daily to do scrubbing or washing. Hours were extremely long and it was assumed that maids were there to make life smooth for the family, to cope with visitors and probably three meals a day. Servants were on the go or on call for a very long day, 7 a.m. till 7 p.m. or longer. One half day a week and a Sunday half day a fortnight seemed general for time off and this made an average, at my conservative estimate, of 66 hours a week. Half days did not start till 2.30 or after lunch dishes had been washed and the girl had to be in at 9.30 or 10.30. This time off applied in 1901 and was still in force according to my informants in the 1930's.

Wages, while appearing low, roughly equalled wages in factories or shops if one added 10/- a week for food, ie a 14 year old girl would receive 5/- which with keep equalled 15/-. A 14 year old shop assistant would have got more than this. But and the qualification, is crucial, the maid worked a 10 hour, perhaps 12 hour day, a 66 hour week and was expected to work Saturdays and Sundays for no extra pay. She was as I've mentioned working, or on call, practically all her waking day. If she had been paid according to the rates for shop assistants, she should have received, after deductions for food, 16s 6d a week. A standard working week of 48 hours and overtime pay for weekends was recommended by two government committees, one in 1923 and one in 1944 but no action was ever taken to implement this. Just as women's work in the home was and still is under-valued so, it seems, was domestic service.

1. Gladys Evans, Wednesbury, Staffs.

Control over hours of work, behaviour, clothes worn, time off was quite strong - boy friends were seldom allowed in the house. But my feeling is that employers could not have imposed such tight discipline had not the girls been brought up strictly and already internalised habits of obedience.

The employers were away and my sister who worked there said "Why don't you ask Arthur down?" (Arthur was the man Mrs. Jaynes eventually married) So I did and of course we weren't on our own though, my sister was married then and her husband - they were in the house - - they used to stay in you see if Mrs. Lucas was away. They were sat in the lounge you see and I went in to shut the dining room window. I heard these footsteps on the gravel. Oh! My goodness, I felt as though I had done a crime. Of course, the gentlemen came in and they (boy friend and sister's husband) were there. You know, I cried all night. It upset me so much. I felt I'd done something wrong but well, others do it. I wasn't alone because my sister was there and she was married you see.

(1)

I think this is interesting and revealing because the girl felt so guilty - she says twice - we were not alone - and she says in another part of the tape of her employer "after all she was responsible for us". So I am arguing tenuously that parents and perhaps teachers paved the way for employers' tyranny. Perhaps parents and teachers had inculcated habits of obedience that a young girl in strange surroundings and away from home would easily transfer to an employer or older servant. The tendencies towards obedience and subservience were there. They only had to be reinforced to produce a "willing servant".

Thea Vigne² presented an open university history T.V. programme which included a live interview. She asked a woman who'd been in service if she remembered having rows with her employer or answering back. The reply was:-

(1) Mrs. H. Jaynes, Birmingham.

(2) Thea Vigne, Essex University.

"Not an awful lot. I used to hold my own as I thought now and again but not an awful lot. You see we hadn't been allowed to check at home and - um - it didn't come naturally."

As E.P. Thompson says in another context; 18th Century Men Servants:

"To eat at one's employer's table and lodge in his barn or above his workshop is to submit to his supervision".

Recently in 1975, in the William Tyndale School inquiry, a member of the inquiry team asked the Headmaster if he did not consider one of his aims was to train pupils in obedience for this was necessary in the world of work outside. The Headmaster replied that he did not agree with this but he considered that he should teach children to question¹. Many people including parents and teachers, would still hold the first view.

PLEASURES AND DIVERSIONS

It would be wrong to suggest that life for servants was uniformly hard. As a maid quoted in the 1923 report said:-

There is nothing better for the girl if she is with good kind people but nothing worse should a girl find herself in a hard place.

(2)

One of my informants had been in service 50 years from 1916 when she was 13 till 1966. This was because, from 1934, when her mother died, she had no home of her own. She had many happy jobs which she could treat as home but of course she had to move on because of factors outside her control. Of one job, where she worked from age 16 to age 23 (1919-1926) she says:

(1) This is my recollection from a newspaper report.
Not verbatim. (PT)

(2) Robert of the Committee appointed to enquire into the present conditions as to the supply of female domestic servants. 1923.

They were very happy years, very happy years - I couldn't say that anything went wrong apart from the occasional tiff you get in any household. They were 7 exceedingly happy years. I loved the children and they loved me - (pause) - I left simply because they would not pay a housemaid any more than I was getting, £24 per annum. I did want a little more money as by then Mother was partly dependent on me. I helped her to pay the rent and I wanted more money. (1)

Later in 1948 the same Linda Rayworth went to be a House Keeper to Mr. Perkins, a widower and a retired draper.

LINDA: "He was 78 at the time and I stayed until his death 8 years later. Looked after him in every way, no-one could have done more".

PAM: Did he appreciate you?

LINDA: "Very much. I was his 'old woman' (with a laugh). I did everything - I did the garden - he hadn't much money - Mr. Perkins was a dear old man. 'He paid me £2 a week in 1948 and I paid my own insurance stamp (10/-). It was a happy home, it was my home. I had my dog with me. He called me Miss Rayworth to other people but to my face I was his old woman. We didn't have meals together - only tea. He did like me to have my tea with him. We had our tea together with a tablecloth and a crochet tray cloth and everything as his wife used to do it. I did everything for him; towards the end of his life he had to be treated like a baby. He had to be bathed and shaved and I sat up with him night and day till the end. And I did the last. I laid him out. And I grieved for him for a year. I did.

I was fond of him. He needed so much attention. Its the people that need so much doing for them that you miss". (2)

(1) Linda Rayworth.

(2) Linda Rayworth.

But of course the happy home finished when Mr. Perkins died and Linda at 53 had had to look for another job. (She is now 73 and has a comfortable council flat and lives alone). When I asked her how it felt not to have to wait on other people any more, she said -

"Like Heaven"

Kate Godfrey worked for Lord Boyle in a country house in Sussex only really used when the family entertained. So duties were light when the family were away and Kate learned to drive a pony and trap and met visitors at nearby Robertsbridge Station. She was one of the servants I class as deferential. She was very impressed and honoured to meet important visitors.

Winifred Foley worked for a time for an old lady of 91 in the Cotswolds. She herself was 14 and was paid £1 a month.

In those days the baker's man called every day. Twice a week the old lady took a fresh batch loaf from him sometimes still warm from the oven. To sit with her in that dining room with sun streaming through the lattice window, watching the japonica blossoms nod against the panes eating crusty buttered newly baked bread, feasting the eye on a standard tea rose through the open door made up for a lot of life's drawbacks.

There were other pleasures too. I never had any time off, but once a month she sent me into Stroud to get a freshly laundered head piece from a little widow woman who did the hand laundry. At the same time I could send a postal order home to Mam and buy myself black stockings or a pair of shoes. To save her tuppence fare I offered to walk - and so had three miles each way of sheer delight from start to finish. In late Spring, wall flowers, tawny velvet to brilliant flame burst from crevices in dry stone garden walls. Sometimes a lady in one of the gardens would bid me a pleasant "Good afternoon". Of course, they didn't know I was a mere "skivvy". It was nice to be spoken to as an ordinary human being.

(1)

Certainly where several servants were kept there could be more fun and companionship and a certain solidarity. But often the fleeting pleasures were appreciated because so much of their lives were controlled and supervised.

DISCIPLINE AND CONTROL

Why was such pervasive control exerted not only over work but over life itself? One view is that employers were in loco parentis and were responsible for the servants, and perhaps there's an element of truth here. But, the employers were part of the larger class system that saw the working class as a race, apart, but necessary, to do unpleasant and labourious work essential for their comfort. Normally the working class lived in different areas and very different houses. In towns they often lived in ghettos avoided by the better off. One of the duties of the subordinate class was to "know their place" and not overstep the boundary between themselves and their betters. In domestic service, the employing upper class was allowing the lower class to step over this barrier and to enter their homes to work and live. Hence it was doubly necessary to define servants' subordinate role and inferiority. Status distinctions were carefully delineated and rigidly enforced. The servants must not be mistaken for kin either in the minds of the employer or to the servant herself or to outsiders. Rules about rising, working, time off, uniform, modes of address, eating, all served to define the servant as different. Having different needs and expectations from women of the family. Even if kindness was shown, the control was there, and because the girl lived on the job she was more open to this persuasion. Erving Goffman¹ the sociologist calls this situation a total institution or one where all aspects of behaviour are controlled. And where it is difficult not to accept the role defined for you by others.

Tone of voice and spoken intimidation were other methods used to imply the servants' lower status. Robert Roberts mentions this in The Classic Slum. It cannot be proved: only imagined. When Gladys Evans related her experiences to me she assumed the accent of her employer when "speaking the employers words". Margaret Powell relates how her employer reprimanded her about the door knocker not being polished

1. Erving Goffman, Asylums.

"Langley (her surname), you have a good home, good food and comfortable lodgings and you're being taught a trade. In return I expect the work to be done well".

"By this time I was in tears what with feeling so inferior". (1)

I am sure this verbal intimidation happened and is stored in the memory of servants but it is something they do not often ordinarily mention.

You could say a sort of apartheid ruled in the house and I've many many examples, but I had better restrict myself to one kind - eating. Servants rarely ate with the family; moreover their meals were interrupted to go and clear dishes for the main family. In quite modern and small houses bells were installed so that the servants could be rung for. Miss Rayworth worked for many years for Mrs. Coates and they were the only two occupants of the house.

"We lived like friends, but we always ate separately except during the war when we ate together to save heating two rooms". (2)

Gladys Evans:

"Well you know, in the morning I used to have to get the children off to school and I was supposed to lay the dining room table for them. One morning I thought I'd save myself some work and I laid the table in the kitchen. Well in any case it was the warmest room in the house, but I was 'caught out'. 'Children must not eat in the kitchen but in the dining room so that was that'". (3)

How did servants perceive this definition of themselves? Some of course accepted it. Upbringing and schooling as girls had prepared them for it. When you enter a set up where rules and customs are already well established it is quite difficult not to conform. But many of the remarks showed that servants did perceive they were being exploited. Very often they couldn't do much about it because of the difficulty of getting another job and poverty at home. Lilian Cross fiercely resented being treated, as she

(1) Margaret Powell, Below Stairs

(2) Linda Rayworth

(3) Gladys Evans

put it, as "an illiterate moron" by employers less intelligent than herself. (1)

The following few extracts show that some servants did feel very strongly that their identity was being taken from them and that their employers, for a paltry sum were not only getting hours of labour but were robbing them of part of their humanity.

A kitchen maid of 21, trained in one of the Government Training Centres set up in the 30's to alleviate unemployment of school leavers, says:

"It seems natural to the mistress that her daughter should have boy friends and invite them to the house, but of course, we are only maids and everyone immediately thinks our boy friends have dishonest intentions. Do you think its pleasant to spend one's whole life with people who make one feel inferior to them". (2)

Christopher Falconer, the gardener in the big house in Akenfield in 1942 puts it

"Servants were just part of this machinery of the big house and people don't thank machines - they just keep them trim and working. A bad servant was just a bad part and was exchanged for a good one as soon as possible". (3)

From Margaret Powell's Below Stairs a quote which fits closely with Goffman's theory

"In some ways we weren't much better than serfs inasmuch as our whole life was regulated by our employers, the hours we worked; the clothes we wore, even our scanty time off was overshadowed by the thought that we mustn't be in later than 10 o'clock." (4)

(1) Lilian Cross, Oxford.

(2) Report on the Post War organisation of private domestic employment 1944 Cmd. 6650.

(3) Ronald Blythe, Akenfield; Penguin Books

(4) Margaret Powell, Below Stairs

"I personally disliked the feeling of being owned. Whatever the circumstances one was in, nothing could be done about it until one had saved some money, repaid the sending fare, paid for one's uniform, and stayed long enough to be given a reference for the next job". (1)

Next a longer piece from Winifred Foley's book where she not only perceives the employers definition of herself, but challenges it.

"The young lady residents were allowed to go on the roof of College Hall, a privilege which was barred to us domestics. To reach the roof the students had to pass the maid's bedrooms. One day I was just coming out when a student came down from the roof. She was a Canadian and apparently not very familiar with the rigid English class system. She started to talk to me. Our conversation became so animated she followed me down until she came to her own floor. We were still laughing and talking when Miss Mather came by. Her smile for the student was pretty chilly but the look she gave me was a real freezer.

"The next day I was summoned to Miss Robson's Office (the Principal) for a lecture in proper decorum for kitchen maids. Which certainly did not include their talking in a familiar way with students.

"That morning I did not go into prayers which were attended by everyone resident in the main hall. That omission alone would have got me summoned to Miss Robson. At 10 o'clock I was told that Miss Robson would see me but first I must put on a clean apron and cap.

"Come in" called Miss Robson and I stood squarely in front of her my head a bit on the high side. She asked me why I had not attended prayers that morning and reminded me that I had been seen talking and laughing on the stairs with one of the lady students. Now, yet more incensed than in the first interview, I told her that the lady had got into conversation with me. Secondly if I was not fit to talk to the students how could I talk to God who was considered a good deal superior to any student?

"You do not talk to God. You pray to God that he may listen to you".

"Well, even if I'm praying to him, if we're all good enough to do that together in His presence why aren't we good enough to talk to each other?"

Miss Robson gave a deep sigh and then a kindly meant lecture on humility. She herself would curtsey to the Queen, we all had our place in Society and ducks could never be happy trying to pretend they were swans. Far better for me if I knew my place and made the best of it. I agreed with her that College Hall was a very good place for servants but she could not offer mine to a more deserving girl as I was giving my notice in there and then. After my previous jobs I thought I had rather cut off my nose to spite my face but I felt a kind of glory in my rebellion. I sang the Red Flag as loud as I dared among the clatter of pots and pans and thought of my dad and all the down-trodden workers of the world and nearly cried.

But many girls either because of internalised feelings of "respect" and restraint or because of the job situation externally, felt unable to speak up even if they were badly treated - I end with another quote from Gladys Evans, whose very tone of voice suggested this resignation and powerlessness.

PAM(Q) "What did she do in the end that made you leave?"

GLADYS "Well, in the end all the children came home from boarding school and there was extra work, you know, and one day there was two teacloths missing and I said I hadn't had them: but it was my habit to hang the day's tea towels on the triplex oven door to dry: and these two teacloths were missing and Mrs. Kerr said (here Gladys assumed the tone of voice used by Mrs. Kerr) "I expect you've burnt them on the oven door -- you haven't got the brains to own up". I said "I haven't burned them. I don't know where the teaclothes are". Anyway, two shillings was stopped from my wages that week. And when the laundry came back on Friday -- there was the teacloths in the laundry basket. They'd probably been put on top of the laundry basket and got pushed in. But, you got no apology. I got the two shillings back but I got no apology. (1)
No.

Mrs. Evans was talking to me in 1972. But this incident in the 30's still rankled.

(1) Gladys Evans

I am not suggesting that all servants had a hard time. Some service jobs undoubtedly were more enjoyable and less onerous than some factory jobs. Girls did escape from unhappy or overcrowded homes into service. A kind employer could give the emotional support that was often so desperately missed by a girl leaving home, family, friends and neighbourhood. But approximately 1,600,000 girls and women were "in service" in 1931 (including hospitals, hotels, institutions). Their wages and conditions of work and free time were not subject to any statutory regulation so that if servants were badly treated or overworked there was little protection for them.

"I said. "I can't stand it much longer" I said, "its getting me down" cos I had to do my work and sit up with the children til one or two in the morning till she (the employer, a Naval Officer's wife) came home, then go to bed, then get up at 6 a.m. So I said to her one day "well, I'm sorry I shall have to leave" I said "I can't put up with it" and she said "Well, I've no money to pay you". I says "Well, I want my money" I said "Such as it is" "Well" she said, "I shall have to go out, the children must stop in the house and you must meet me down at the Carfax" (in Oxford) and then she only gave me half of it"

Add to this neglect over wages and hours of work. The extremely strong control exerted over the girl's private life (if she could be said to have a private life) And one is left with the feeling that resident women servants were, indeed, a hidden army. Hidden in two senses; - Hidden as an element in the work force; domestic servants were not an easily identifiable industry with protective legislation; the fact that they were scattered and "living on the job" made trade union organisation difficult. Secondly, they were hidden in the household from the family and from the order and comfort they created.

1. Mrs. A.D. quoted in W.E.A. West Oxfordshire Oral History Broadsheet
No. 4, Spring 76. Rewley House 35p incl. post.
Wellington Sq.
Oxford.