



opening extract from
a brush with the past:

1900–1950

the years that changed our lives

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Below stairs - London - 1900

Better-off homes had the luxury of a coal fire in the main rooms.

Fireplaces had to be cleaned out, swept and a new fire lit every morning before the family got up.

The *Brownie* box camera went on sale in the USA.



Photography was now within the reach of eager amateurs.



Oil lamps were still in use in the home.

Women suffered the agony of tightly laced corsets to achieve the desired 'hourglass' figure.



In Vienna, Austria, designers and architects like Otto Wagner were breaking with the old century tradition and inventing an original, modern style.

Dr Sigmund Freud published *The Interpretation of Dreams*.



Followers of the Arts and Crafts movement in interior, textile and furniture design adopted a lower, more flowing style of dress.



Motor cars were still a novelty on the road.



Towns and cities were still full of horse-drawn vehicles and lit by gas lamps.

The first underground electric railway had just opened in London.

Wells, goggles and duck-cuts were worn by motorists.

1900

I found it very easy to re-create a London basement kitchen at the turn of the century. I live in this kind of Victorian terrace house and, although the basements in our street are now mostly opened up into spacious kitchen-dining areas, the structure of ours remains much the same.

Kitchens then tended to be dominated by a cook and a cast-iron cooking 'range' which also supplied hot water. Unlike the grand 'upstairs, downstairs' households so familiar from television, which employed many servants of both sexes, with their own complicated pecking order, a middle-class home such as this would probably have employed two or three 'live-in' domestics, all female.

The lowest person in this household was the scullery maid or 'tweeny', a teenage girl, often isolated and homesick, who slept in an unheated attic shared with another servant. The kitchen at least was warm – in summer unbearably hot – and the cook's temper was often correspondingly short.



Britain, America and Germany were the biggest coal-producing countries in the world. As coal mining grew, so did the steel works, creating three gigantic industrial powers.

Pit boys as young as 13 worked in mines alongside the men, and took their dinner underground.

There were many households without bathrooms. Hot water was carried upstairs. An average household used a fraction of what we waste today.

Hip baths, china washing bowls, chamber pots and slop pails all had to be emptied by hand.



In ordinary homes, keeping the family clean was hard work.



Many households made do with a primitive outdoor toilet – a 'privy' – which was shared with the neighbours.



Washing up in a stone sink, with a hand-pumped cold-water tap.



Hats were worn everywhere. They signified what social class you came from.

Hats like cartwheels, top hats, straw hats, hats with feathers, woolly hats, felt hats and 'dermatologist' hats with earflaps.



At work, the fireman showed his rank by wearing a bowler hat while his workmen wore cloth caps.



Parlour maids wore a cotton print dress in the mornings and changed into a black dress and a smart apron to wait on the family in the afternoons.



British butlers and footmen were not permitted to grow moustaches, but they were allowed sideburns.



Refrigeration was in its early stages. Food was kept in a cool larder on slat shelves, carefully covered.