

opening extract from

a brush with the past:

1900-1950

the years that changed our lives

written by

shirley hughes

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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.



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.

The Brownie Box camera went on sale in the USA.



Photography was now within the reach of eager amateurs.

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 lowliest 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.

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



Oil lamps were still in use in the home.



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



The first underground electric railway had just opened in London.

In Vienna, Austria, designers and architects like Otto Wagner were breaking with the old ornate traditions 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 looser, more flowing style of dress.

Veils, goggles and dusters were worn by motorists.



Motor cars were still a novelty on the road.

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.



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 'deerstalker' hats with earflaps.



The tweeny assisted the cook and the parlour maid. She helped prepare vegetables, carried coal upstairs from the coal cellar, laid fires, emptied slops, polished endless brass, scrubbed doorsteps and, of course, washed up.

Time off for an evening visit to church was allowed on Sundays and a half-day off a week was considered reasonable. Male admirers were strictly forbidden, though tradesmen delivering to the back door were known to linger for a chat or a little flirtation on the quiet.

Above stairs, a young wife's duty was to supervise domestic staff, to hire and fire, order meals, entertain and see that the home ran smoothly for her husband. It was an awesome and often lonely responsibility.

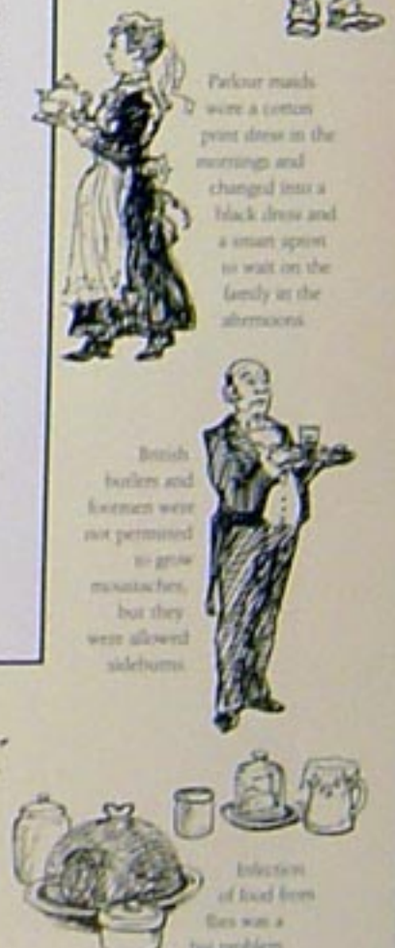
There was no shortage of domestic labour. For women it was a major source of employment, in many ways preferable to factory work. Women often continued to work after marriage and did all their own household chores too.



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



At work, the foreman 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.

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.



Infection of food from flies was a big problem.

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