Talking Tees Valley Activity Pack

Servants & Domestic Lives

Tees Valley Museums

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Tees Valley Museums

Welcome to another edition of the Talking Tees Valley Activity Pack

Each month we will use objects from one of our museums in the Tees Valley to take a closer look at the lives and stories from people in our area.

In this pack we uncover what life would have been like for the servants working at Preston Hall, now Preston Park Museum and Grounds in Stockton-On-Tees.

The servants here served the wealthy Ropner family and worked hard looking after everything including gardening, cleaning, and cooking. Lady Ropner would have overseen the lady's maid, house maids and laundry maids while Mr Ropner would have been waited on by his footmen, chauffeur and butler.

Servants

At the turn of the 1900s over a million women were working in domestic service. The work was physically hard with long hours and poor wages. Girls started in service as young as twelve and would stay in service until they married.

This dress is a domestic servant's dress kept in the collection at Preston Park Museum and Grounds. It's a heavy garment made from red and white striped cotton twill, a robust material made to take lots of wear and tear.

It would have been worn 'down stairs' away from the family they served, likely by a laundry maid, scullery maid or a 'maid of all work' who had to do every job in the house. It was terribly hard work.

This maid is serving tea to the ladies of the Ropner family. You can clearly see that her dress and apron are very different from the red and white one above.

That's because this is her 'best' uniform, worn when she is in the presence of the family.

Families like the Ropner's made sure that their servants always looked smart as it reflected well on them.

Sensory

What would the maid in this picture be seeing, smelling, and touching?
Maybe she can smell the tea she is serving, and the perfume of the ladies sitting down. Is the tray she is holding cold and hard to touch? Perhaps from where she is standing all she can is the tops of the ladies' hats in front of her! What do you think?

Lucy Judson

The kitchen was always the beating heart of any home. It's where a woman would spend most of her time, cooking, and baking. But for Lady Ropner the kitchen would have been off limits and the domain of her servants.

Here the servants would have prepared the families' meals under the supervision of the cook, Lucy Judson.

As the cook Lucy would have overseen all the meals made from scratch for the family and their guests.

She would have been able to use the fresh produce grown on the estate's walled garden, where her husband was Gardener. She would have been a physically strong woman as she had no modern gadgets to help her in the kitchen!

Lucy Judson poses in this photograph with her husband, Lawrence, nephew Cecil and dog Turnball, 1912.

Sensory

Can you imagine the smell of the freshly baked bread from Lucy's kitchen?

Objects used by servants!

1. Heavy pots, pans, kettles, and cutlery like these would have been just a few of the objects cooks like Lucy would have used every day.

Can you guess what the wooden utensils are? Hint, they would have been used to shape a product in the dairy. *See last page for the answer!

2. The chamber pot like this one would have been used to go to the toilet in during the night. Each family member would have had one, usually kept beneath the bed, and they would be emptied by the servants in the morning!

3. The servant dedicated to looking after the children in the family was called a Nurse. A family like the Ropner's would have been able to afford toys like these for their children and grandchildren. There's a music box, dolls house furniture, a rattle, a porcelain doll and a feeding bottle from the 1930s/40s.

The oldest object here is the tiny music box painted with two children on the front. It's from the 1840s or 1850s!

4. A laundry maid would spend her days washing, ironing, and starching the fashionable clothing of the family she worked for. Preston Hall had its own laundry room where the laundry maid would have spent all her time. It was tough, hot work!

5. Early morning starts were normal for maids and raking out the fire was the first task of the day. At Preston Hall there would have been a fire in every room the family used, such as the drawing room, the library, morning room, nursery and the bedrooms.

She would sweep out all the soot, clean the grate then light a new fire for the day ahead.

Sensory

What would the texture of the soot feel like through your fingers? What would it smell like?

Have a go…

Can you match these modern objects to their old equivalent?

*These are butter paddles! They are used to shape the butter into a finished block.

You can find all our Talking Tees Valley packs through the Tees Valley Museums website under ‘Latest News’ or here: https://teesvalleymuseums.org/news/

To contact us about our packs please email: Teesvalleymuseums@stockton.gov.uk

All images in this pack are courtesy of Preston Park Museum and Grounds, Kirkleatham Museum and Grounds and The Dorman Museum.