

An Edwardian Maid

Sully u3a members welcomed Debra John, a performance artist, for a dramatic monologue from the point of view of 'Phyllis', an Edwardian maid.

On a sweltering day, wearing a maid's typical afternoon costume, minus underskirt and woollen stockings, Phyllis tells potential servant recruits – us, her live audience – about a typical day in the house, while my lord and lady are away in London. The Edwardian setting is significant: electricity, motorised vehicles and telephones were arriving in the great houses, potentially threatening many servants' positions.

Every servant knew their precise place in the elaborate hierarchies and house protocols. Middle-ranking Phyllis is proud of her £20 a year and fortnightly afternoon off. A typical £6 a year hall boy was at the bottom, whereas the most senior servants - female housekeeper or male butler - might get a pension and cottage in the grounds upon retirement. Footmen could be paid more for merely being taller or looking good if paired with another footman. A servant's name could be changed if their master or mistress didn't fancy it.

The work was heavy. Junior servants rose at 5a.m. to ready the house and couldn't sleep until the family did. Maids carried 30lb coal scuttles and hot water cans servicing the house's many fires and bathrooms. Footmen laying a 16-guest dinner placed up to 500 items of tableware and cleared away afterwards.

Theft traps for servants - stray coins and jewellery - were planted deliberately, as to be caught stealing was immediate dismissal without a character (reference). The exacting housekeeper might even tell a housemaid her pile of dust was 'not big enough for the room.'

The house was seen as a well-oiled machine: a place for everything and everything in its place. Servant job satisfaction was knowing "while the house isn't ours, it's here because of us" and their room and board were included.

Debra researched Phyllis herself, including the writing of a maidservant, Hannah Cullwick 1833-1909, who kept detailed diaries when in service. Written accounts from housemaids are infrequent: most accounts and memoirs generally come from senior servants such as butlers, housekeepers, cooks, and gardeners.

Debra's work gives voice to these people forgotten from history: the selfless people keeping the world going. She ended with a sobering reminder of how many of her audience must have had grandparents or great-grandparents 'in service.' **SJW**