

The London and Middlesex

2015

HISTORIAN

Volume 24



Official Journal of
The London and Middlesex Historical Society



(Figure #1) "Servant's Magazine" 1869.

The Servant Question: Exploring the two worlds of Eldon House

Tara Wittmann

GOOD TEMPER SHOULD BE CULTIVATED by every mistress, as upon it the welfare of the household may be said to turn; indeed, its influence can hardly be overestimated, as it has the effect of moulding the characters of those around her, and of acting most beneficially on the happiness of the domestic circle. Every head of a household should strive to be cheerful, and should never fail to show a deep interest in all that appertains to the well-being of those who claim the protection of her roof. Gentleness, not partial and temporary, but universal and regular, should pervade her conduct; for where such a spirit is habitually manifested, it not only delights her children, but makes her domestics attentive and respectful; her visitors are also pleased by it, and their happiness is increased.

Isabella Beeton, Book of Household Management¹

Background

Built in 1834, Eldon House is the oldest surviving dwelling in London. From 1834-1959, Eldon House was the residence of four generations of the Harris family and the servants that were employed to maintain the household. During their 125 year tenure at Eldon House, the Harris family was actively involved in the local community and travelled widely. Many family members recorded their experiences, in the form of diaries and letters. These accounts, together with the Harris household belongings, provide a detailed and fascinating glimpse into London's history. In 1960 the great-grandchildren of the original owners John and Amelia Harris, donated Eldon House and its 11-acre property to the City of London. The rich material culture exhibited in the home is complemented by archival documents and photographs preserved in Western University's Archives. The museum thus reveals a particularly rich picture of upper

class family life in 19th and early 20th century London, while the archives illustrate social matters concerning the development of London and Canada. In order to fully explore the story of Eldon House, the *full* household must be represented.

The scope of this article aims to explore domestic life of upper-middle class households in the late Victorian era and early 20th century, using Eldon House as a case study. With primary material of both servant and served as well as the ephemera that influenced the structure of their relationships, a glimpse into the domestic life in London Ontario may be revealed.

Consideration of the locale of London needs to be taken into account when considering what was typical or expected in the early to mid-Victorian period. The guidelines that demarked the boundaries between servants and served were clearly set and observed, yet originated from Britain. As will be explored, employers could not always afford to strictly adhere to the rules

of employment as their British counterparts, due to the low population of the area and lack of domestic training available. Also, in the case of the Harris family, who was firmly rooted in the idea of being a self-made clan thanks to Eldon House's first owner John, one can find a conscious effort made to provide opportunities to individuals in distressed circumstances or those who had a desire to alter their trajectories.

Roles and relationships of servant and served

The Victorian mindset was a hierarchical one, where societal classes had their own concerns and traditions which would seldom converge. Clear roles for individuals would be outlined through formalized rules of etiquette. A plethora of books were published for an audience hungry to conform to "proper behaviour"—where a grave misunderstanding might take place for a simple misjudged action, one could never be too careful.

Books of Victorian etiquette were geared to the emerging upper-middle class, whose fortunes swelled as the result of industrialism and British imperialism. Suddenly, "how-to" manuals were in print, designed to aid those who had not been reared in the class in which they now found themselves. Perhaps the most recognizable book of this style is *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* published in 1861 (figure 2). The tome was comprised of information for "the Mistress and all levels of servant — including also Sanitary, Medical, & Legal Memoranda, with a History of the Origin, Properties, and Uses

of all Things Connected with Home Life and Comfort." It was intended as a guide of reliable information for the aspirant middle classes as well as the servants who tended them.



(Figure #2) Front piece of Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management, 1861.

Just as there existed publications geared toward the upper and middle classes that spoke to the issues of keeping servants, there too were publications specifically for the domestic worker, touching on the opposite sentiment: on how to live with an employer and perform ones duties to the best possible result (figure 1). Thus an Elaborate social structure was set up and understood between employer and employee

which would allow not only for efficient household management, but also attempt to smooth differences in class, behavior and communication.

Servants Life at Eldon House

There were always servants at Eldon House, the actual number varied depending on the financial state of the family at any particular time, or on the fashion of the day. The Harris's once estimated that over the 125 years they lived at Eldon House, they must have had about 200 different servants. Some stayed for a short time only (the record was just a few hours) while others stayed for their entire working lives.

Typically, there was a cook responsible for meals and managing the kitchen. Additionally, a parlour maid was employed, who served meals, answered bells, and did only light housework, and one or two housemaids, who did the heavy cleaning (scrubbing, sweeping, cleaning fireplaces, emptying chamber pots, etc.). Sometimes a nursemaid was required, as when Helen Portman, daughter of John and Amelia Harris, died in childbirth and a woman who had recently given birth was hired as "wet nurse" for the Harris grandchild. A governess would be engaged in the very early years before Amelia Harris began writing a journal – this position was a difficult one to categorize as the woman was usually of a better class than other servants and inhabited a middle-ground, neither one of the family nor one of the servants. These women would have lived in the house and would have typically had their own rooms.

Male servants mainly did outside work at Eldon House such as the gardening and looking after the horses and were more apt to come in on a daily basis and who lived

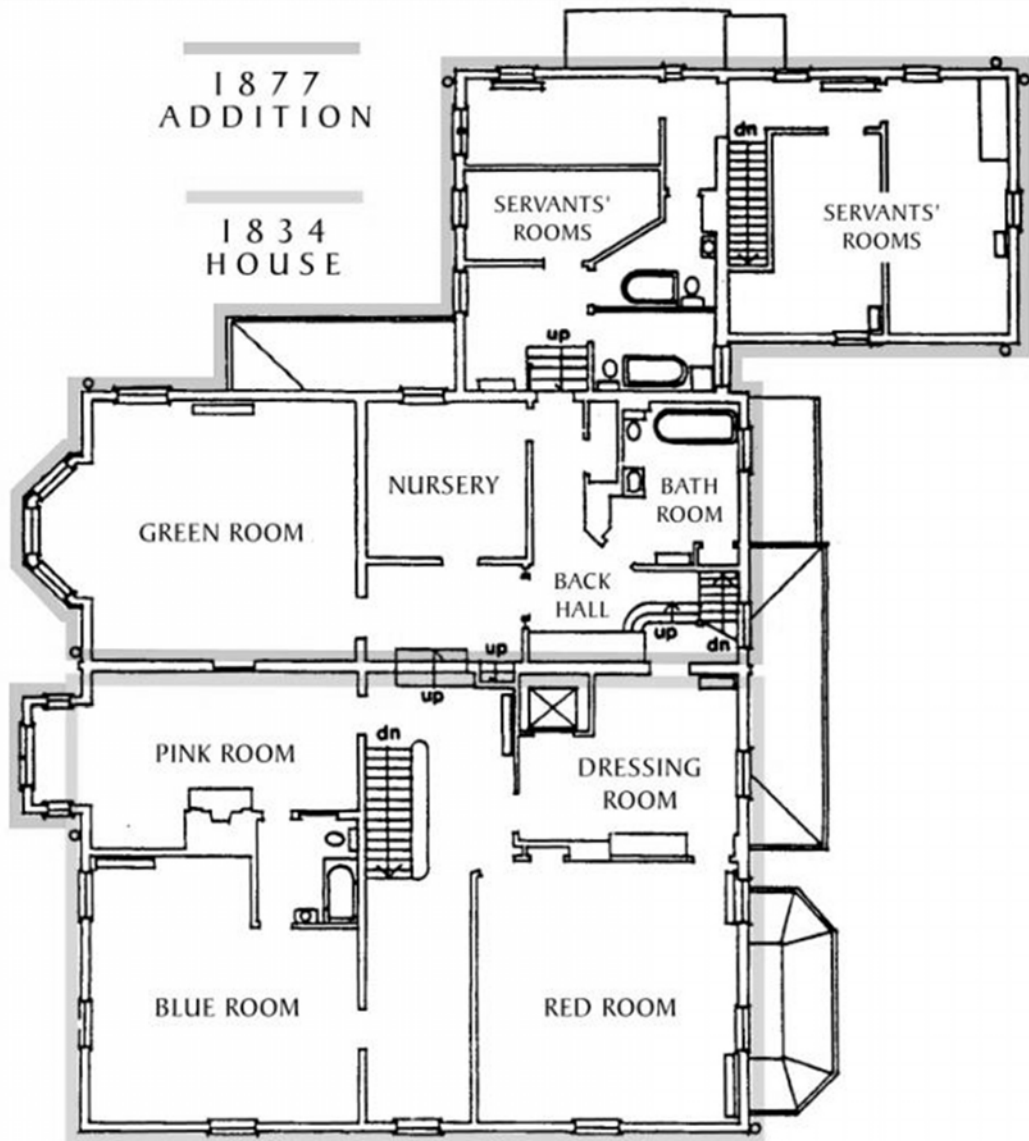
in their own accommodations. Though the family briefly had a butler, it soon became clear that they required a general manservant who would carry wood for the fires and do other heavy labour. In the absence of a butler, the cook acted as the lead domestic in the household.

The days were long ones for the servants at Eldon House – usually rising at 7 a.m, and getting back to bed from 10-11 p.m. The duties of the day would be interrupted by an hour "dinner" (or lunch – their biggest meal of the day, usually hot) and a half-hour "supper" (smaller, cold).

Going "into service"

Service in the Victorian era was a calling for which workers would commit their lives to the families they worked for. A servant was expected to be loyal, diligent, hardworking, and obedient, not absent without permission, nor have visitors, nor cause harm to their master and were not permitted to drink or gamble. In exchange for a servant's effort, their employer provided payment, usually monthly. In Canada by the late nineteenth century a female servant received about five or six dollars a month, while a male servant would earn twice that amount. Room and board was paid for as was a uniform, and several changes of apron, etc. Presents were always exchanged at Christmas as well as on birthdays.

Servants between themselves would have their own hierarchy – usually based on responsibility and proximity to the masters. This hierarchy would be observed in an almost despotic manner – in large households, the butler and the cook took on the role of master and mistress below stairs, the butler carving the meat, the cook



ELDON HOUSE

SECOND FLOOR

(Figure #3) Floor plan of upper story at Eldon House.

reprimanding lazy workers. Additionally, rules of etiquette also would relate to the servant class. For example, a veil or a parasol could not be used by a housemaid, but could be used by a ladies maid.

The architecture of a house also contributed to the autonomy of the servants – in that they occupied their own quarters, usually surrounding the kitchen. At Eldon House, the arrangements were not the typically “Upstairs/Downstairs” where the sleeping arrangements were in the attics and work space in the basement, but rather “Front/Back” as can be seen in the pictured floorplan (*figure 3*). The servants occupied over one-quarter of the home, had their own bathroom with running water and their own entrance and exit. In fact, the mailing address in which the servants received their post was different from the Harris family address. From both servant and family testimonials, one derives the sense that the privacy of the inhabitants in the two “households” at Eldon House was respected.

The choice of a domestic worker to go “into service” was often considered a calling or vocation – those happiest in their profession gave their lives over to their work, choosing often to remain unmarried and in service to a single family for their lifetime. Alternatively, if the job was one chosen in desperation or duress, it could not be a happy state. The days were long, the work was hard, and the thanks few. In the mid-1860s, Arnold Bennet, a critic of the servant system would write that a servant was a “dehumanized drudge” who was expected to work 14-16 hours a day, eating mainly leftovers and had to be content with 1 full day off a month, 1 free evening a week, ½ a day off on Sunday and a week’s vacation a year². Certainly, entering service was

something gone into with caution – workers were not unionized as would be the case in other professions, and were subject to the scrutiny of employer and co-workers.

One of the most valuable things that a servant possessed was his or her “Character” – this being essentially a letter of reference or recommendation of the individual. The highest praise in such a letter would include mention of being “clean” “reliable” “punctual” or “genteel.” Leaving your employment in a rage of indignation at treatment would result in a “loss of character.” There would be circumstances that induce Amelia Harris to dismiss some of her servants without a reference. According to her diary, on January 13, 1859, “Katherine, the housemaid got tipsy and made confusion at dinner table”³, this theme continues several months later with an entry on March 8, 1859, where Amelia recounts that “ Our dinner was very nice, but one decanter of wine has been watered so much that it was scarcely wine and water. Katherine’s weakness betrays itself too often.”⁴

Aside from drinking, other concerns written about in the Harris diaries include stealing, loose morals, violence, gossiping, dishonesty, etc. These things were closely scrutinized by the mistress of the house, so to retain an even balance in the household. Disputes between servants would be frequent – and at worst would be taken up to the mistress of the house to resolve.

One such instance to be recorded by Amelia Harris on June 12, 1860: “Elizabeth⁵ is very much troubled about the tale her cook told her mother about Charlie (the groom) and the house maid. Cook says there is an improper intimacy between them, which Elizabeth does not believe, but feels hurt at

the report. I advised her to be very cautious how she listens to reports Roman Catholic servants give against protestant ones. At the same time for her own sake and the sake of those under her care, she should keep a watchful eye over her household.”⁶

The Mistress

The ultimate responsibility of hiring and retaining domestic staff was in the hands of the “Mistress of the House.” Consider the following “call to arms” in the following passage by Isabella Beeton: “as with the commander of an army, or the leader of any enterprise, so is it with the mistress of a house. Her spirit will be seen through the whole establishment; and just in proportion as she performs her duties intelligently and thoroughly, so will her domestics follow in her path.”⁷

The role of the Mistress in relation to her servants was varied: certainly she would advertise for positions, obtain a character reference upon hiring, and would outline tasks, and ensure that a servant was observant of these duties. This role can clearly be seen in the diary and letters of Lucy Harris. Lucy was the doyenne of her home Raleigh House and then at Eldon House. She struggled with domestic affairs, including the hiring of servants. Her difficulties in household management can be gleaned from her diary entry of February 11, 1872 when she writes “Advertised for a cook on the Herald, and Free Press and the Advertiser, no answer...Ellen [maid] does seem satisfied to stay and girls are so hard to get. My accounts are a mess. God grant that I may become more patient.”⁸ Indeed patience, as well as feeling the burden of the responsibilities tied to the mistress of the household is a topic that Lucy continues to relate in her



(Figure #4) Amelia Harris, c. 1879.
Collection: Eldon House.

diary, when praying for patience with her staff as she promises herself to keep quiet on domestic affairs with her husband “as he dislikes it so much.”⁹ Throughout Lucy’s accounts, one can glean that she was an unwilling leader (in Beeton’s terms) when it came to her domestic arrangements. She actively became familiar with the art of housekeeping, the personal concerns of her staff as well as became the keeper of account books. These documents in themselves are fascinating, providing insight into the cost of living and of keeping domestic staff. According to Lucy Harris’s account ledger

from 1887 (figure 5) the annual expense of \$700 for the four Eldon House servants, would represent \$17,000 in today's funds accounting for the inflation rate.

How to gain a position

The way in which servants came to be engaged changed greatly throughout the nineteenth century. Previous to the late 1850s servants relied on word-of mouth recommendations to learn of employment opportunities and often preformed "cold calls" on potential employers to inform them of their availability and interest. In researching the archives of the *London Free Press* and the *London Advertiser* one can find a sudden spike the number of advertisements placed in the 1860s. The most common advertisements found in that period were for employers seeking servant girls, wet nurses or housekeepers. In the late 1860s and early 1870s there was an increased demand for farm servants and for outdoor workers such as gardeners and "men of all work." One sees by the wording of the advertisement's that there was often an ethnic preference indicated by employer, where the majority sought English help, though servants of Scottish origin became popular as well. French speakers interestingly were only in demand for governesses. The "help wanted pages" gained so much in popularity and readership that in the 1870s they were relocated from the back of the publication to the front page.

Expenses 12. Months Eldon		
Servants	700	
Fireing Coal	200	
Wood	60	
Light	70	
Water	32	
Telephone	35	
Taxes	350	
Insurance Fine	30	1457
Market		
Vegetables	68	
Fruit	24	
Milk	72	
Tea & coffee	30	
Flour	70	
Eggs	30	
Butter	120	
Fish	24	
Chicken & game	48	486
Meat	240	
Groceries	260	500 00

(Figure #5) Lucy Harris's 1887 account ledger. Collection: Eldon House.

In the *London Free Press* archives, there are several instances where the Harris family of Eldon House advertised for servants. One such example, dated to March 9, 1861 is an ad placed for a cook – which was a position in the house that had a fair turn-over¹⁰ (see figure 7).

The ad states: "WANTED, A good female cook. Apply to Mrs. Harris, Eldon House, Ridout Street. Good references will be required."¹¹



(Figure #6) Advertisement for Servant, London Free Press, 1858.



(Figure #7) Advertisement for a cook, issued by Amelia Harris in the London Free Press, 1861.

Additionally, as can be gleaned by numerous entries in the Harris Diaries, the family also relied on references from friends and acquaintances, at one time resulting in the hiring of a cook who relocated to Eldon House from England.

Lived Reality vs. Scripted Etiquette

While the expectations between servant and served were clearly delineated in written guides, class divides and architectural boundaries, the reality of a mix of people living under one roof was much untidier. Naturally close relationships sprang up between the family and their servants and the divide was made blurry. For example, in 1860, Amelia Harris records

her feelings for a long-time servant, Betsy Cameron, who for a year had been in poor health¹². Eventually Betsy dies in her own home on Christmas day in the company of Amelia – she was there when “Betsy breathed her last” and would continue in attendance, even helping to “lay her out” for the funeral. These don’t seem the actions of a hard hearted employer who, if she followed the rules set out for a good mistress would not show her emotions or act in a friendly manner to one of her inferiors. Such acts of generosity were not uncommon for Amelia Harris, who, when learning of her cook’s intention to marry, offered to host her wedding and reception at Eldon House in the dining room, which indeed she did. The reaction to the news of her cook’s interest in matrimony is amusing, as Amelia wrote on April 15, 1870: “Mrs. Page has given me an astounding piece of information this morning – she is going to be married. She has been with me as cook for more than 9 years and as she must be 60 years of age, I thought she was safe from matrimony. She is a good cook and I fear I shall not be able to get another as good. Yet I cannot regret her marrying as she will get a comfortable home for her old age and will be her own mistress.”¹³

Perhaps more interesting and revealing than Amelia Harris acting kindly to those who she liked and valued, can be found in her diaries as they reveal a number of instances in which she acts for the “greater good” in employing often difficult people. Amelia’s diaries have several occurrences of having to intervene in disagreements in the kitchen in the late 1850s, cajoling the servants to work in harmony. The culprit for



*(Figure #8)
Mary Klojggard,
Margaret Mitchell
and Gladys Harpur,
c.1940.*

*Collection:
Eldon House.*



*(Figure #9)
William Barnett and
assistant, in what is now
"Harris Park."
c. 1940*

*Collection:
Eldon House.*

the disruptions was invariably Mrs. Panton, the cook, who is described as follows on July 20, 1858: “Mrs. Panton is a good specimen of pride and poverty. She was in a state of starvation when she came to me and I should send her to the same state if I sent her away now as her husband is so lazy no one will employ him for more than a day and no one will take her with her child to service. Yet she cannot eat cold meat and will not notify other servants that their dinner is ready. And yet I pity her. She is hardworking and has a helpless husband, one child and another coming. And what is to become of her?”¹⁴

The Servant Problem

Into the twentieth century, there came to be a growing dissent on the part of employers and was referred to as “the servant problem.” Countless articles of the period have been written about the issues surrounding the “help” and the increasing difficulty in finding a suitably deferential servant, who was trustworthy and conscientious. Post World War I census records suggest a great drop in the numbers of those entering or returning to “service.” The social hierarchy had shifted after the war, in favour of greater self-sufficiency on part of masters and regulated, well-paying work for employees and more affordable housing for the working class allowed for a new social dynamic.

At Eldon House, the Harris family continued to retain servants. Many of the stories of the servants who worked at the site during the early to mid-20th century were collected by museum staff, when re-creating the servants quarters upstairs in the late 1990’s, and contributed to a compilation called the “Servants Album” available in a reading room at Eldon House. The

documents in the album are the inverse of what exists from the 19th century in that the testimonials are that of the servants, not the family that were served. Coupled together, with the understanding that attitudes changed with the eras, the information in the diaries and the servant album tell a story of the extended Harris family. While the structure of the relationships between employer and employee continued to be formal, photographic evidence as well as oral history suggests a positive – and often rather fun – work environment. Additionally, the turnover of staff slowed into the 20th century, where servants were retained for a career-span, rather than a short duration. Pictured on page 16 (*figure 8*) one can see Mary Klojggard (maid), Margaret Mitchell (cook), Gladys Harpur (house-parlour maid) (c.1940) with Ronald Harris’s trophy pieces at the north west corner of Eldon House, after they removed them from the front hall for their annual cleaning. Margaret Mitchell began working at Eldon House in 1929 and stayed for 30 years, past the point that the house was translated into museum.

Another long-term servant who had the respect and esteem of the Harris’ was a man named William Barnett, acting as head gardener (*see figure 9*). He was employed in 1916 by Ronald Harris and would remain with the family for 46 years. William was responsible for the 11 acres of the property – the ornamental gardens on the top of the hill around the house as well as the extensive vegetable garden on the flood plain below.

At its peak, the vegetable garden required 5 men in the summer and 3 in the winter. A greenhouse was also in his care, as were the swimming pool, jersey cows and the tempestuous boiler. Only in 1962 would William retire from this site.

Conclusions

Certainly at this moment of contemporary life, few have first-hand experience with the domestic system explored in this article. The expectations of the realities of “service” in today’s mindset is usually one which cannot reconcile the two groups – conceptions of socialism and class injustices and difficulty in re-creating the reality of the historic class-system skews the reality of the domestic system as it was experienced. By using the primary sources related to Eldon House and its inhabitants – both servant and served – the Dickensian negativity that might have been expected has given way to a sense of the nuances of the very close relationships that were experienced.

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London Free Press, March 9, 1861. Microfilm, London Room, London Public Library.

Endnotes

¹ Beeton, Isabella. *Book of Household Management*, London: S.O. Beeton Press, 1861, pp.82

² Bennett, Arnold. *Delphi Collected Works of Arnold Bennett*, Volume 1 of Series Four. London: Delphi Classics, 2013. Pg. 134.

³ Harris, R., *The Eldon House Diaries*, Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1994, pgs. 90.

⁴ Harris, R., *The Eldon House Diaries*, Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1994, pgs. 95.

⁵ Elizabeth Loring Harris, married to Amelia’s eldest son John who in 1860 had been married only one year and looked to her mother in law for advice on running her household.

⁶ Harris, R., *The Eldon House Diaries*, Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1994, pp. 163.

⁷ Beeton, Isabella. *Book of Household Management*, London: S.O. Beeton Press, 1861, pp.80.

⁸ Harris, R., *The Eldon House Diaries*, Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1994, pp. 436.

⁹ Harris, R., *The Eldon House Diaries*, Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1994, pp. 437.

¹⁰ At one point the family had engaged a consecutive seven cooks in the space of six-months.

¹¹ “Wanted Advertisement,” *London Free Press*, March 9, 1861. Microfilm, London Room, London Public Library, Central Branch.

¹² Harris, R., *The Eldon House Diaries*, Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1994, pp. 177.

¹³ Harris, R., *The Eldon House Diaries*, Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1994, pp. 299.

¹⁴ Harris, R., *The Eldon House Diaries*, Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1994, pp. 78.