

'I Don't Want Anything Like That': The Coercion of British Women and Girls into Domestic Service, 1918–1928

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Abstract

Despite the First World War (WWI) challenging women's traditional sphere of work (the home) as well as Britain's class structure, domestic service remained the largest employer of women and girls until the end of the Second World War. Why, given the reluctance of working-class women to return to domestic service after WWI, did so many take up 'hated domestic service' in the decade following the war?¹ WWI increased working-class households' reliance on women's income—whether obtained through employment or unemployment benefits. While others have shown the role of state coercion in women's employment in domestic service in the aftermath of WWI, this article highlights the extent to which working-class families were complicit in that coercion. As many British families were deprived of male breadwinners as a result of the war, some pushed their daughters to work as servants as it was one job 'that any girl could get'.² Others turned to the occupation as a means of protecting the 'moral health' of a daughter, where they considered it to be in danger.³ Drawing upon a range of oral history testimonies, this article examines the role of working-class families in ensuring that domestic service remained an important feature of working-class women's and girls' lives throughout the 1920s.

1 Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women between the Wars, 1918–1939* (London: Pandora Press, 1989), 49.

2 Mr Hudson quoted in: Domestic Service Interview with Mrs Irene Hudson, 26 February 1975, GB131.1103, Manchester Studies 25, Tameside Local Studies and Archive Centre (hereafter TLSAC), Ashton-under-Lyne.

3 Selina Todd, 'Poverty and Aspiration: Young Women's Entry to Employment in Inter-War England', *Twentieth Century British History*, 15, no. 2 (2004): 138, doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/15.2.119.

My mother ... used to threaten me that she would put me in service but I never took the threat seriously, but the day I was fourteen arrived ... and she said now you are going to Mrs Wright's tomorrow morning.

– Mrs Sandys, Manchester-based domestic servant, 1920s–1930s⁴

My mother ... put an advertisement in the news. She got a hundred and twenty replies for a job for me, and it ended up with me going in service.

– Irene Hudson, Manchester-based domestic servant, 1920s⁵

Approximately 400,000 British women were reported to have left domestic service for work in munitions factories and other war-related industries during the First World War (WWI).⁶ They joined another 4.4 million women engaged in the 'industrial labour force' by April 1918.⁷ While domestic service in Britain had commenced its decline as an employer of women by the end of the nineteenth century, 'Personal Service'—as recorded in the Census of England and Wales—decreased at double the rate between 1911 and 1921 than it had between 1910 and 1911.⁸ WWI clearly had a significant impact on domestic service as an occupation in Britain.

Before 1914, domestic service was an assumed means of earning an income for many working-class girls, from the time they left school until they married.⁹ However, the war had shaken Britain's Victorian and Edwardian class structure, though not completely upending it. Master and servant, fighting and dying side-by-side at the Somme and at Passchendaele, challenged what formerly seemed an unbridgeable class gap. Working-class widows and daughters sacrificed their husbands and fathers by the hundreds of thousands, all the while keeping the home fires burning. In post-1918 Britain, they would not unquestioningly slip

4 Domestic Service Interview with Mrs Sandys, 28 January 1975, GB131.1103, Manchester Studies 29, TLSAC, Ashton-under-Lyne.

5 Interview with Mrs Hudson.

6 Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1987), 39.

7 Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War: The British Experience* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 47; Adam W. Kirkaldy, *Industry and Finance (Supplementary Volume)* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, Ltd, 1920), 1.

8 Edward James, 'Women at Work in Twentieth Century Britain', *The Manchester School*, 30, no. 3 (1962): 283–99. See also Theresa M McBride, *The Domestic Revolution: The Modernisation of Household Service in England and France 1820–1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1976), 112.

9 Pamela Horn, *Life Below Stairs in the 20th Century* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2001), 141.

back into accepting the authority, assumed superiority and condescension servant-keepers were wont to visit on their employees. As one Manchester-based servant recalled of the period, domestic employers had to start treating their employees 'as human beings ... as equals' given that 'girls were beginning to have a better opinion of themselves'.¹⁰ As other job opportunities became available to women—in factories, shops and offices—domestic service became an occupation of last resort.¹¹ It was this low status of the occupation, coupled with poor working conditions, that caused women to 'struggle so bitterly against "going into service"'.¹² That struggle was not to be easily won.

Yet after decades of decline, domestic service in Britain showed its first slight increase in the 1931 census.¹³ While that rise was clearly a result of the Great Depression, it was not the sole contributing element. The Depression might have tipped the percentage of employed women in domestic service into 'increase' territory, but there were factors at play before October 1929 that actively worked against the downward trajectory the occupation had been experiencing. This article hones in on those factors in the decade immediately following WWI, to explain why working-class women's and girls' employment in domestic service did not decline more dramatically in the lead-up to the Depression.

Several scholars of interwar domestic service in Britain have reflected on the role of state coercion in compelling working-class women to return to domestic service or take up the occupation for the first time. A short survey of that work is provided in the next section, as well as a summary of those state coercion methods. In this article I argue, however, that working-class families sometimes colluded with the state in pushing girls and women into domestic service—an aspect that has mostly been overlooked in other scholarly writing. The remainder of the article contributes to rectifying that oversight in three sections. First, it explains why working-class families needed the women and girls in their households to be in paid employment after the war. Second, it explores why those women and girls were so reluctant for that work to be domestic service. Finally, this article turns to examine how working-class mothers, in particular, facilitated

10 Domestic Service Interview with Mrs Ethel Cleary, 16 September 1975, GB131.1103, Manchester Studies 28, TLSAC, Ashton-under-Lyne.

11 Pamela Horn, 'Experiment or Anachronism? The Role of the National Institute of Houseworkers', *Labour History Review*, 66, no. 1 (2001): 61, doi.org/10.3828/lhr.66.1.61.

12 Violet M Firth, *The Psychology of the Servant Problem* (London: CW Daniel Company, 1925), 14.

13 James, 'Women at Work', 291.

and compelled their daughters' entry into domestic service. Through this, I will show that, while there were pressing economic needs that required female employment among the working class, parents' insistence that work be domestic, usually of the 'live-in' or residential kind, were sometimes driven by moral concerns. The vulnerability of those families, due to their inherent structural disadvantage, compounded the effects of the state's coercive policies.

To support my argument, I rely chiefly upon a collection of interviews held at the Tameside Local Studies and Archive Centre in Ashton-under-Lyne, on the outskirts of Manchester.¹⁴ The interviews of approximately 40 former domestic servants formed part of a larger oral history project conducted by the Manchester Studies Unit in the 1970s. The unit was established in 1974 by Manchester Polytechnic—now Manchester Metropolitan University. It had a 'general commitment to the people's history' of Manchester and its region at a time when working-class areas of the city, especially, were being demolished for new developments at unprecedented rates. Among its efforts to rescue historical evidence of working-class life in the city, the unit conducted oral history interviews with distinct groups of working-class people. One such group was domestic servants; the records of those interviews are drawn upon in this article.

The domestic service interviews in the Manchester Studies Collection are particularly compelling due to the breadth and depth of information they have recorded. They provide an array of insights, not only into how domestic service was performed, but into the relationship between the domestic and public spheres during the early decades of the twentieth century. These insights pertain predominantly to the Greater Manchester area, where most of the women interviewed had lived and worked. Some grew up and/or worked outside North West England and added their experiences of life and domestic service elsewhere in the country.

Memory, as captured through oral history interviews, has been increasingly common as an historical source since the 1960s, but has not been uncontroversial—as Alistair Thomson's writing on the subject has shown. Oral history has been subject to criticism from conservative historians for

14 The Greater Manchester metropolitan county was created in 1974. In addition to the cities of Manchester and Salford, it includes the boroughs of Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan.

its unreliability as a source to those on the Left questioning whether it was 'necessarily radical and democratic'.¹⁵ In the 1980s, challenges to the positivist ideas about the objectivity of the researcher emphasised the value of the oral history interview to both interviewer and narrator.¹⁶ When, as in the case with the Manchester Studies Collection, a person's memories are recorded 50 years or more after the events they are reflecting on, their recollections and the telling of their stories are, inevitably, influenced by their experiences in the intervening decades and by their ability to recall details with relative accuracy after such a long time.

It should also be noted that, due to time constraints, I consulted the transcripts of the interviews rather than the recordings themselves. Inflection, tone and other rich elements of 'the spoken word' get lost in the use of transcribed interviews, as Francis Good points out.¹⁷ Transcriptions are also subject to the 'selective editing' of transcribers and to the potential of blurring the lines between primary and secondary sources.¹⁸ These shortcomings notwithstanding, the transcribed interviews of these former domestic servants provide valuable insights into their individual circumstances in and around domestic service in the first half of the twentieth century.

State Coercion and Domestic Service

Academic interest in domestic service in Britain beyond the Edwardian era is still relatively new. Much of the focus of domestic service historians has been on the peak of the occupation—the Victorian era.¹⁹ Since 2000, studies concerned with domestic service beyond the beginning of WWI

15 Alistair Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering in Oral History', in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald A Ritchie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 80, doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195339550.013.0006.

16 Ibid.

17 Francis Good, 'Voice, Ear and Text: Words, Meaning and Transcription', in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London & New York: Routledge, 2016), 458.

18 Ibid., 459.

19 Pamela Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Wolfeboro, NH: A Sutton, 1990); Frank E Huggett, *Life Below Stairs: Domestic Servants in England from Victorian Times* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977); Leonore Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England', *Journal of Social History*, 7, no. 4 (1974): 406–28, doi.org/10.1353/jsh/7.4.406; Edward Higgs, 'Domestic Servants and Households in Victorian England', *Social History*, 8, no. 2 (1983): 201–10, doi.org/10.1080/03071028308567561; Leonard Schwarz, 'English Servants and Their Employers During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', *Economic History Review*, 52, no. 2 (1999): 236–56, doi.org/10.1111/1468-0289.00124.

have increased, predominantly through work produced by Pamela Horn, Diane Aiken, Lucy Delap and Selina Todd. Horn and Aiken focus on the first half of the twentieth century, whereas Delap's work takes a more even view of the century in its entirety.²⁰

Horn, Delap and especially Aiken highlight the role of the 'coercive nature of the unemployment benefits system' in working-class women's employment in domestic service between the wars.²¹ Domestic servants, while controversially included in the National Health Insurance (Part 1) aspect of the *National Insurance Act 1911*, were excluded from the much more restrictive Unemployment Insurance (Part 2).²² Under the Act, those employed in the male-dominated occupations of engineering, shipbuilding, and construction and building at the time were entitled to a maximum of 15 weeks' unemployment pay per year for involuntary unemployment.²³ Unemployment insurance was expanded to occupations related to the war, including munitions workers, in 1916.²⁴ This saw women eligible for unemployment insurance for the first time, and in huge numbers, which became problematic for authorities when WWI ended. If women took up domestic service, not only could they no longer collect unemployment benefits because they were employed, but they would cease to be eligible for those benefits if they became unemployed from their domestic service job. Employment in domestic service, therefore, removed unemployed women as a financial responsibility for the state.

Within a year of the Armistice, approximately 775,000 women had lost their wartime jobs.²⁵ By March 1919, over half a million women were claiming unemployment benefits. In order to lift the burden of those benefit payments on government coffers, Lloyd George's government

20 Out of eight chapters of Pamela Horn's *Life Below Stairs*, five look at the period 1920 to 1939, one at 1900 to 1920, with two covering the remaining six decades: Horn, *Life Below Stairs*. See also: Diane Rose Aiken, 'The Central Committee on Women's Training and Employment: Tackling the Servant Problem, 1914–1945' (PhD thesis, Oxford Brookes University, 2002); Lucy Delap, *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Lucy Delap, 'Housework, Housewives and Domestic Workers: Twentieth Century Dilemmas of Domesticity', *Home Cultures*, 8, no. 2 (2011): 189–210, doi.org/10.2752/175174211x12961586699801.

21 Delap, *Knowing Their Place*, 13.

22 Laura Schwartz, *Feminism and the Servant Problem: Class and Domestic Labour in the Women's Suffrage Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 173.

23 Pat Thane, 'The Making of National Insurance, 1911', *The Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 19, no. 3 (2011): 218.

24 Tony Lynes, 'From Unemployment Insurance to Assistance in Interwar Britain', *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 19, no. 3 (2011): 221, doi.org/10.1332/175982711x596973.

25 Beddoe, *Home and Duty*, 48.

introduced a suite of measures to reduce women's dependence on unemployment benefits while addressing middle-class women's demands for more and better servants.²⁶ A primary vehicle for implementing the government's strategy to solve women's unemployment through domestic service was the Central Committee on Women's Training and Employment (CCWTE). The committee was established in August 1914, abandoned during WWI, and re-formed in 1919 under the Ministry of Labour.²⁷ Over the course of the 1920s, the remit of the CCWTE narrowed from including training schemes for individuals and in various areas to focusing almost exclusively on group training for domestic service. Concentrating their efforts on domestic service training aided the governments of Stanley Baldwin (Conservative) and Ramsay MacDonald (Labour) in their defence of funding training for unemployed women in the face of male unemployment.²⁸ The CCWTE received more than £1,373,000 to conduct their programs—the equivalent of roughly £63 million in 2017—during the interwar period.²⁹

The CCWTE was not the only weapon in the British government's arsenal to compel unemployed young women and girls into domestic service. Their work stood alongside that of Employment Exchanges and, later, Unemployment Assistance Boards. Employment Exchanges, with which people had to register to receive unemployment benefits, could match unemployed women with families in need of servants, but could also act with impunity where they refused to take up the positions offered. Employment Exchange officials exercised their power to withhold unemployment benefits to induce claimants to take up positions away from home.³⁰ Such officials seemed oblivious to the very real obstacles women faced in the positions they were offered. For example, the requirement of many domestic service posts to 'live in' made it an unfeasible option for women with children (many of whom were war widows), which seemed baffling to officials.³¹

26 Ibid., 49; Aiken, 'Central Committee', 2.

27 Aiken, 'Central Committee', 2–3.

28 Ibid., 4.

29 Keith Laybourn, "'Waking up to the Fact That There Are Any Unemployed': Women, Unemployment and the Domestic Solution in Britain, 1918–1939", *History*, 88, no. 4 (2003): 68, doi.org/10.1111/1468-229x.00282. Based on 1930 values, calculated through the UK National Archives' historical currency converter, which only goes up to 2017. Available at: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter.

30 Aiken, 'Central Committee', 181.

31 Ibid., 182.

Officials' treatment of unemployed women occurred against a backdrop of substantial pressure on the government to push more women into domestic service. In April 1923, the *Daily Mail's* 'Special Correspondent', Richard Curle, ran a series of four articles on 'Scandals of the Dole' in which he called for women to be refused benefits if they were 'capable of domestic service'.³² By that time, the issue had 'become so intractable' that a committee had already been discussed and was appointed by the Minister of Labour, Montague-Barlow, in the same month Curle's article series was published.³³ The resultant report on the 'Supply of Female Domestic Servants' was effectively a response to public pressure from the press and the middle class to investigate a supposed link between the payment of unemployment benefits and the lack of domestic servants. The 1923 report followed only four years after a similar investigation by the Ministry of Reconstruction on the 'Domestic Service Problem' in 1919.³⁴ Unsurprisingly, the two reports had rather similar findings. The primary difference was that the 1923 report devoted an entire section to the 'Effect of the Unemployment Insurance Scheme on the Supply of Domestic Workers', with several pages of an appendix containing responses to complaints that had been made regarding women, domestic service and unemployment benefits.³⁵

The purpose of this article, however, is to show that domestic service participation rates were not only driven by a top-down approach but that there was some degree, however limited, of complicity by working-class families—mothers in particular—in keeping women and girls in service. Among historians of the working class and domestic service in this era, Selina Todd stands out in her treatment of factors contributing to female participation in domestic service along similar lines to what is covered in this article. Her work taps into the intersection between class and young

32 *Daily Mail*, 10 April 1923, quoted in Horn, *Life Below Stairs*, 30.

33 Elaine Harrison, 'Women Members and Witnesses on British Government Ad Hoc Committees of Inquiry 1850–1930, with Special Reference to Royal Commissions of Inquiry' (PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 1998), 204.

34 Ministry of Reconstruction (UK), *Report of the Women's Advisory Committee on the Domestic Service Problem together with Reports by Sub-Committees on Training, Machinery of Distribution, Organisation and Conditions* (London: HMSO, 1919).

35 Ministry of Labour (UK), *Report to the Minister of Labour of the Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Present Conditions as to the Supply of Female Domestic Servants* (London: HMSO, 1923), 25–35. See also 'Appendix D: Summary of Complaints Investigated', 42–53.

women's labour in England, especially in the first half of the century.³⁶ She also considers the part of mothers in their daughters' 'occupational aspirations' and pathways into the workforce, including domestic service, and references the interviews conducted by the Manchester Studies Unit in some of her writing.³⁷ This article draws on Todd's excellent work but focuses strongly on the role of the structural disadvantage of working-class women and girls in explaining the perpetuation of domestic service in the aftermath of WWI, and how the war exacerbated that disadvantage, starting with why their employment was so desperately needed at a time when the male breadwinner model remained dominant.

The Need for Women's and Girls' Employment

With a younger brother at the front, Anna Bradley, aged 18 in 1914, 'wanted to do something' for the war effort. That 'something' was working on gas respirators for the duration of the war. Within a week of the Armistice, she had simply been made redundant from her job of four years and found herself looking for work at an Employment Exchange. She was offered a domestic service position, which 'at that time you couldn't refuse', given the scarcity of jobs.³⁸

Attitudes of the interwar British government towards female unemployment—on both sides of politics—were predicated on a view of the primacy of male employment to families and society that was out of step with the contemporary working-class British reality. The concept of a male breadwinner earning enough to keep his wife and children became

36 Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England, 1918–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Selina Todd, 'Young Women, Work and Family in Inter-War Rural England', *The Agricultural History Review*, 52, no. 1 (2004): 83–98; Selina Todd, 'Poverty and Aspiration'; Selina Todd, 'Domestic Service and Class Relations in Britain 1900–1950', *Past and Present*, 203 (2009): 181–204, doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtp014; Selina Todd, 'Breadwinners and Dependents: Working-Class Young People in England, 1918–1955', *International Review of Social History*, 52, no. 1 (2007): 57–87, doi.org/10.1017/s0020859006002781; Selina Todd, "'Boisterous Workers": Young Women, Industrial Rationalization and Workplace Militancy in Interwar England', *Labour History Review*, 68, no. 3 (2003): 293–310, doi.org/10.3828/lhr.68.3.293.

37 Todd, 'Poverty and Aspiration', 136.

38 Domestic Service Interview with Mrs Anna Bradley, 21 January 1975, GB131.1103, Manchester Studies 41, TLSAC, Ashton-under-Lyne. Anna Bradley was born in Widnes, outside Liverpool, with the family moving to Manchester when her father got a job there.

prevalent towards the end of the nineteenth century and still influenced government and societal attitudes towards male and female employment. As Hilary Land points out:

In the course of the nineteenth century the home and the workplace became separate for the majority of men and the unit of labour changed from the family to the individual. Married women were not expected to make an economic contribution to the household and if they did it was often not perceived to be 'productive' work. Men were assumed to earn a family wage.³⁹

Despite men—and unions—using their need to earn a 'family wage' to justify demands for higher wages, many failed to earn enough to support a family.⁴⁰ Contemporary studies found that up to 20 per cent of the interwar English working-class population lived below the poverty line. The employment of women and children was key to keeping families above that line. The need for their wages was exacerbated by circumstances created by WWI, including the death or injury of male breadwinners.⁴¹

Male deaths during WWI compelled many more women and children to take up paid employment than might otherwise have been the case. Estimates of British war deaths during WWI vary greatly, but a figure of around 700,000 is most commonly cited.⁴² Between 1911 and 1921, England and Wales saw an increase of 265,172 widows, from 1,364,804 to 1,629,976. This compares to an increase of 118,397 over the preceding decade and 175,222 in the decade that followed.⁴³ Correspondingly, the working female population increased by 10.4 per cent from 1911

39 Hilary Land, 'The Family Wage', *Feminist Review*, no. 6 (1980): 60.

40 *Ibid.*, 56–7.

41 Todd, 'Breadwinners and Dependents', 64.

42 See Table 4 in J M Winter, 'Britain's "Lost Generation" of the First World War', *Population Studies*, 31, no. 3 (1977): 451; Dmitri Jdanov et al., 'Estimates of Mortality and Population Changes in England and Wales over the Two World Wars', *Demographic Research*, 13 (2005): 393–4.

43 Based on figures from the 1901, 1911, 1921 and 1931 Censuses for England and Wales. Census of England and Wales, 1901, Summary tables: Area, houses and population; also population classified by ages, condition as to marriage, occupations, birthplaces, and infirmities, BPP 1903 XXIX [Cd. 1523]; Census of England and Wales, 1911, Summary tables: Area, families or separate occupiers and population; also population classified by ages, condition as to marriage, occupations, tenements, birthplaces, and infirmities, BPP 1914-16 1 [Cd. 7929]; Census of England and Wales, 1921, Table 4: Occupations of Females Aged 12 Years and Over, distinguishing Twelve Age Groups, Marital Condition, Industrial Status and, for Certain Occupations, Those Working 'At Home'. (London, HMSO, 1921); Census of England and Wales, 1931, Table XLVIII: Occupations of Males and Females aged 14 and over: Proportions according to Marital Condition and Industrial Status, England and Wales, 1931 (London, HMSO, 1931).

to 1921, compared to 5.7 per cent for men.⁴⁴ A much greater percentage of women were entering the workforce than men due to the far-reaching effects of WWI.

Ethel Cleary's Mancunian family was already poor when her father died in the war in 1918, when she was 10. She left school at 14, as was common at that time, entering an enjoyable period employed at a confectioners' shop. This came to a swift end when she contracted a skin disease. The wife of the doctor treating her was in search of a servant, and between him and her mother she was 'just pushed into it without ... any preparation, without any warning ... I wasn't given any time to consider'. They were 'desperately poor' and needed the money, and she would not have thought to question her mother or an authority figure such as a doctor. Consequently, she moved away from her family to embark on the first of five different live-in servant positions.⁴⁵ The war exacerbated her family's financial problems, effectively forcing her into domestic service.

Where husbands and fathers returned from the war, the psychological trauma, sometimes coupled with physical injuries, ailments or disabilities caused many to struggle to be fully functional as income earners. Official estimates placed the number of British war-wounded at 1,662,625.⁴⁶ Physical injuries varied significantly, from amputated limbs, to facial disfigurement, to the limiting effects of lodged shrapnel. Due to its complex and hidden nature, the psychological cost of such a protracted war—paid for by ex-servicemen in their quality of life, productivity, employability and relationships—is impossible to calculate.

Reportedly, 80,000 British soldiers were treated for 'shell shock'—a form of post-traumatic stress—but 'many, many more suffered than were treated'.⁴⁷ Norman Fenton, a psychologist who worked with the American Expeditionary Forces based in France, surveyed 758 men treated as 'psychological casualties' at the base in 1919–20 and again in 1924–25.

44 Aiken, 'Central Committee', 100.

45 Interview with Mrs Cleary.

46 The War Office (UK), *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War, 1914–1920* (London: HMSO, 1922), 237.

47 James Bradley, 'Shell Shock Treatments Reveal the Conflict in Psychiatry's Heart', *Conversation* (6 August 2014), theconversation.com/shell-shock-treatments-reveal-the-conflict-in-psychiatrys-heart-29822. Tracey Loughran points out that not all cases historically identified as shell shock would be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) today. She asserts that PTSD is not 'simply shell shock by another name' but encompasses a specific set of symptoms. See: Tracey Loughran, 'Shell Shock, Trauma, and the First World War: The Making of a Diagnosis and Its Histories', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 67, no. 1 (2012): 102–3, doi.org/10.1093/jhmas/jrq052.

While the men were not British, it still provides an indication of the adjustment 'war neurotic' ex-servicemen faced when re-entering civilian life.⁴⁸ Of those classified as 'neurotic', 22 per cent could work full-time but 'continued to suffer from one or more rather severe nervous difficulties'. The largest group, 38.9 per cent, were considered 'normal' and able to fulfil their role as breadwinners, but not without symptoms. However, nearly 40 per cent (the three worst-affected categories combined) were unable to work full-time or at all.⁴⁹ Provision for their families would have to come from other sources.

Government pensions for veterans were inadequate to support a family, and income from wives and children was required to make ends meet.⁵⁰ Further, psychological war injuries took a high toll on families. That those injuries were not visible, and how to treat them not apparent, could strain relationships to breaking point. Elizabeth Anderton, who grew up in Bolton, Greater Manchester, described her father as having 'died from the war'. He had been gassed and suffered from 'shell shock'. Her mother left him for another man after his return. Consequently, she and her two sisters were placed in a Waifs and Strays Home, from where she was trained for and sent out to service.⁵¹ This shows the vulnerability of working-class children to the indirect effects of war on family life, and how their parents' unwillingness or inability to care for them resigned girls to domestic employment.

Men who were not at the front also had their jobs affected as certain industries faltered due to the war's end, increasing families' reliance on female members' income. Molly Ducksbury's father worked for a ship building company after serving in the war. When the war ended, the company's licence was not renewed.⁵² While she had already left home for work as a servant at that point, the family needed the money she could contribute even more, given her father's sudden unemployment. His anger and drinking habits were, unsurprisingly, compounded by the loss of his job. His temperament, worsened by his war experience, likely contributed to her decision to move as far afield as London, from Newcastle, when she

48 Peter Leese, 'Problems Returning Home: The British Psychological Casualties of the Great War', *The Historical Journal*, 40, no. 4 (1997): 1060, doi.org/10.1017/s0018246x97007395.

49 Norman Fenton, *Shell Shock and Its Aftermath* (St Louis: The C.V. Mosby Company, 1926), 91–4, 97.

50 Leese, 'Problems Returning Home', 1056.

51 Domestic Service Interview with Mrs Elizabeth Anderton, 24 October 1974, GB131.1103, Manchester Studies 21, TLSAC, Ashton-under-Lyne.

52 Molly Ducksbury grew up in a working-class home in Jarrow, County Durham, in the 1900s–1910s.

turned 14 in 1918—the year her father returned from the war—and was able to leave school.⁵³ Not only did an unemployed breadwinner compel women and children in the family to seek employment, domestic service provided girls with an employment option away from a difficult home situation that also came with accommodation and respectability.

The Aversion to Employment in Domestic Service

Some girls, like Molly Ducksbury, were keen to leave their family home for a domestic service position that was far afield, but many wanted to remain close to their families. This was among the reasons why women and girls were reluctant to take up domestic service, despite the ample supply of the work and their need for an income. In an era of increased awareness of workers' rights, an occupation that required a worker to be continuously and indiscriminately at the employer's beck and call had become untenable. In a memorandum included in the Ministry of Reconstruction's 1919 *Report on the Domestic Service Problem*, women's rights activist Lilian Harris expressed her disagreement with the committee's conviction that providing training was 'the most important question' in resolving the occupation's issues. Instead, she considered 'the lack of freedom arising from living in the employer's house' as the main cause of workers' objections and suggested a 'living out' system.⁵⁴ Lack of free time, and lack of autonomy in what little free time they did have, left servants with few opportunities to socialise outside work, compounding the solitude of an already lonely job.

While a declining minority of servants were employed as part of a large domestic staff, the vast majority of servants were working in homes with only one or two servants.⁵⁵ Not only was the burden of work on these

53 Domestic Service Interview with Mrs Molly Ducksbury, 28 January 1975, GB131.1103, Manchester Studies 35, TLSAC, Ashton-under-Lyne.

54 *Report on Domestic Service* (1919), 5–6. Lilian Harris came from a wealthy family but was very active in the women's and labour movements at that time. She was particularly involved in the Women's Co-operative Guild, an organisation that spread the co-operative movement but also participated in political campaigns for women's rights. Her partner, Margaret Llewelyn Davies, was a very successful general secretary of the Guild. See: Gillian Scott, *Feminism, Femininity and the Politics of Working Women: The Women's Co-operative Guild, 1880s to the Second World War* (London: Routledge, 2005), 13, doi.org/10.4324/9780203981344.

55 Todd, 'Domestic Service', 191.

servants great, they wanted more opportunities for 'liberty in the evening'.⁵⁶ Recreation clubs to cater for servants' social needs were consistently suggested but of little use if employers were unwilling to allow servants the time to attend them.⁵⁷ Such clubs were not to be exclusively for servants, so as to avoid 'undesirable social distinctions between domestic workers and others'.⁵⁸ The subservient nature of domestic service, especially when 'living in', had a decidedly adverse effect on the occupation's status in the eyes of the working class.

As detrimental as employers' attitudes towards their domestic employees were to the occupation, working-class girls and women often encountered the most negativity about 'being in service' from their peers. According to the Ministry of Labour's 1923 report on domestic servants, it was 'not so much the employers, as [maids'] own friends and relatives who look[ed] down upon domestic service'.⁵⁹ Author and middle-class occultist Violet Firth also pointed to 'the contempt in which servants [we]re held by their own class', but related it back to the treatment by employers.⁶⁰ In a job where she was treated as inferior, Firth posited that the servant was 'despised by the girl who ha[d] found a trade in which she can sell her labour without selling her independence'.⁶¹

The negative perception of domestic service among the working class even influenced the desirability of servants as marriage partners. Ethel Cleary, from Manchester, worked as a servant in the 1920s and said that it was 'degrading' and 'quite low to go into service' at that time.⁶² Another former servant Irene Hudson and her husband agreed that there was a 'definite social stigma' attached to the occupation, as it was 'sort of a last resort work'—the one job 'any girl could get'.⁶³ The other job options available to women meant that domestic service was seen as 'insecure, intolerable, or anachronistic as a social institution'.⁶⁴ It was, therefore, unsurprising that female servants would hide being in service when first meeting a potential romantic interest—even lying outright about their

56 'Lack of Parlourmaids', *Times* (London), 9 June 1915, 11.

57 See *Report on Domestic Service* (1919), 4, 5, 12, 24, 29 and *Report on Domestic Servants* (1923), 8, 18, 34.

58 *Report on Domestic Service* (1919), 25.

59 *Report on Domestic Servants* (1923), 11.

60 Firth, *Servant Problem*, 22.

61 *Ibid.*, 21.

62 Interview with Mrs Cleary.

63 Interview with Mrs Hudson.

64 Delap, *Knowing Their Place*, 3.

occupation. Mrs Arnold pretended to work in a factory, as servants 'were looked down on, there's no doubt about that'.⁶⁵ Irene Hudson's husband defied his family outright by marrying her, a woman they thought beneath him on account of her being a servant.⁶⁶

The popularity of the occupation was not improved by government attempts to coerce women into it. The domestic training centres set up by the CCWTE were concentrated in troubled regions, known as Depressed, Distressed or Special Areas, whereas the employers requiring the services of those being trained were not. The government identified the areas of South Wales, Scotland and England's North East (notably Durham) as 'suffering extreme hardships of unemployment'. These were 'highly specialised industrial regions' before WWI, with a concentration of heavy industries, such as steel, shipping and coal mining, that were harshly affected by postwar conditions. Through the training centres and Employment Exchanges, the government aimed to shift unemployed females from such 'unemployment blackspots' to areas with a high demand for servants.⁶⁷

Rather than focusing on rejuvenating areas of high unemployment, the British government resorted to punitive measures to coerce the unemployed to take up jobs wherever they were to be found. As more young women in the South of England escaped from domestic service into factory work, those unemployed in the North were expected to replace them. Not only did this breed resentment—forcing girls and women into jobs they did not want in places they did not want to be—but it was not always effective. Some girls, though presumably not many, opted to forfeit their benefits rather than be coerced into taking faraway domestic jobs.⁶⁸

The CCWTE's large-scale interwar recruitment and training drive was meant to link domestic employers seeking servants with unemployed women, decreasing the number of women claiming unemployment benefits. The British government's 1919 *Report of the Women's Advisory Committee on the Domestic Service Problem* identified training as the key to raising the status of the occupation and making it more attractive to

65 Domestic Service Interview with Mrs Arnold, 21 October 1975, GB131.1103, Manchester Studies 22, TLSAC, Ashton-under-Lyne.

66 Interview with Mrs Hudson.

67 Aiken, 'Central Committee', 181, 186, 211; Beddoe, *Home and Duty*, 62–4; Henry A Mess, 'The Present Position in the Distressed Areas', *The Political Quarterly*, 8, no. 3 (1937): 354.

68 Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910–2010* (London: John Murray, 2014), 65.

women and girls.⁶⁹ It failed to take into account, however, the full remit of the reasons the occupation was so unpopular and why women refused to leave kith and kin to take it up.

Elizabeth Hughson was recruited for one such training centre in Manchester, the city where she lived with her family as one of 12, around 1923, when she would have been 19. She protested, initially: 'I said no, I've got a good home, I got a good home, I don't want anything like that'. Her objections reflect the sentiment among the working class that domestic service was an occupation of last resort. Nonetheless, she was strongly encouraged to take the course in order to improve her chances of securing employment, which she did. She had suffered injuries to her eyes in a factory job that had left her unemployable for five years and with no other feasible option but domestic work. The training succeeded in increasing Elizabeth Hughson's employability as she was offered a job in London upon completing her course. Despite her need for work, she was able to decline it without penalty, and soon found another position closer to home.⁷⁰ Women like Elizabeth Hughson did not willingly choose domestic service as an occupation, but were compelled to take it up due to pressure from authorities and lacking other options for earning a desperately needed income.

Working-class women were not necessarily any more enthusiastic about being domestic servants before WWI, but few employment alternatives existed for women then. According to Nellie Jones, born and raised in Marston, Cheshire, there 'were no factories' when she and her older sister started paid work just before the war, but there were plenty of factory opportunities by the time her younger sisters reached school-leaving age.⁷¹ The North had a longstanding history of factory employment before the war—even women and girls worked in Manchester's cotton mills. Mrs Jones' comment was likely the perception of a girl growing up in a rural part of one of the city's neighbouring counties. As war-related factories closed when the war ended, so did the avenue whereby many working-class women and girls had managed to avoid domestic service. A big government push to return women to domestic service after WWI, to get them off 'the dole', and the use of punitive measures if they did not

69 *Report on Domestic Service* (1919), 7.

70 Domestic Service Interview with Mrs Elizabeth Hughson, 15 October 1974, GB131.1103, Manchester Studies 26, TLSAC, Ashton-under-Lyne.

71 Domestic Service Interview with Mrs Nellie Jones, 31 October 1974, GB131.1103, Manchester Studies 10, TLSAV, Ashton-under-Lyne.

capitulate to that pressure—alongside the economic needs of working-class families—saw a reluctant return to the unpopular occupation. The British government, however, had an unlikely partner in this campaign—working-class mothers.

Working-Class Mothers and Their Daughters' Domestic Employment

Many families could not risk losing what little government benefit their daughters were eligible for and encouraged them to take the domestic service opportunities presented to them by the Employment Exchange. Despite a preference to keep their daughters close and the potential dangers of sending them to live far away with strangers, parents knew they 'either did that or starve'.⁷² Mrs O'Neil, one of 13 children, described the provision of room and board in both private and institutional domestic service as an important part of why girls, even those from 'nice, respectable families', took up domestic work.⁷³ Decent accommodation and food, or the fear of it being worse elsewhere, kept some servants in positions where they were treated abominably. For those facing poor living conditions at home and whose families relied on their income, returning home was not an option. Conversely, those with a good home situation to which they could return felt less compulsion to stay where they were unhappy.⁷⁴

For girls with no family home, there was little choice but service until they married. Those who were orphaned or separated from their parents, like Elizabeth Anderton, were trained for domestic service and posted out to positions from their children's home. Once they ceased to be a ward of the state and until they married, live-in domestic service provided them with a place to live that kept their marriageability intact. Therefore, despite the sexual vulnerability inherent in residential domestic service, it provided some perceived moral benefits. Anna Bradley affirmed this sentiment, reflecting on her time in service as a 'nice bringing up'. She felt that girls who struggled to adapt to the strictures of service were from less disciplined homes and preferred the (moral) freedom of factory work.⁷⁵

72 Domestic Service Interview with Mrs O'Neil, 24 February 1975, GB131.1103, Manchester Studies 4, TLSAC, Ashton-under-Lyne.

73 Interview with Mrs O'Neil.

74 Interview with Mrs Hughson.

75 Interview with Mrs Bradley. While moral judgement is inherent to her response, it was much more indirect than its inclusion here might suggest.

While some parents were reluctant to send their daughters away to residential service, others welcomed the opportunity to instil in them the discipline they considered to be lacking. As opposed to factory work, some working-class mothers viewed domestic service as 'a secure and respectable occupation'.⁷⁶ The appeal of the occupation for some parents was its socially isolating nature that could curb a daughter's potential for moral misdeeds. The use of domestic service as a means of reforming young women and girls thought to be in need of it was not new but parents faced new challenges in managing their daughters' morality in the 1920s and 1930s. Greater leisure time and the consumption of media were seen to have a troubling effect on young women, particularly in relation to their morality. Contemporary social commentators feared that young women's exposure to romance magazines and the cinema was encouraging 'unreal expectations of life and unsuitable values', with the strongest criticism that of creating 'an unhealthy preoccupation with the opposite sex'.⁷⁷

For many working-class parents struggling with the effects of those new influences on their daughters, the answer was domestic service, which 'curbed a daughter's liberty and thus protected her moral health'.⁷⁸ While Anna Bradley welcomed the restrictions of 'live-in' service, preventing her getting 'into mischief', Mrs Sandys' mother used to 'threaten' her with service for that very reason.⁷⁹ Mrs Sandys, who grew up just outside Manchester between the wars, saw her mother eventually carry out those threats. Reflecting on it, Mrs Sandys felt that she was sent into service as a 'punishment' for being a 'tomboy' and not responding 'very well' to discipline at home. If addressing this was indeed the purpose of her time in service, it succeeded. Talking about one employer, Mrs Sandys said, 'I think she had broken my spirit completely, so I just became that ... I was very obedient—I didn't question anything—I did as I was told and life just went on'.⁸⁰ In her case, domestic service succeeded as a means of moral reform, but at a clear cost to her mental and emotional health.

Despite putting Mrs Sandys in service for the occupation's disciplinary benefits, her mother would not allow her daughter to be mistreated. One weekend, while working in their local curate's home, Mrs Sandys

76 Todd, 'Young Women', 89.

77 Penny Tinkler, 'Cause for Concern: Young Women and Leisure, 1930–50', *Women's History Review*, 12, no. 2 (2003): 245–6, doi.org/10.1080/09612020300200359.

78 Todd, 'Poverty and Aspiration', 138.

79 Interview with Mrs Bradley; Interview with Mrs Sandys.

80 Interview with Mrs Sandys.

experienced a 'very bad cold'. She recalled that, when they had had colds as children her mother usually plied them with homemade remedies, and they simply continued on with school and other activities. Therefore, she did not see the need to stop her work because she was sick. When her sister, who had gone to visit her, told their mother how Mrs Sandys was continuing to work in spite of being so poorly, the mother would not stand for it. The next morning, finding her daughter in a steam-filled wash house where she was doing the 'colossal usually weekly wash', her mother marched upstairs to the employer, with whom she then had a few words, before taking her child home with her. Mrs Sandys never found out what her mother had said to the curate's wife but had heard her tell others that her employer had been using her 'for a slave' and that she was adamant that 'none of [her] girls [would] slave as hard as [she had] slaved'. It was clear that, for some working-class parents, there was a limit to the kind of treatment they would allow their children to be subjected to in their work as servants, even if they were the ones pushing them into service in the first place. In a time when the demand for servants was great but the supply not, another position could easily be found.⁸¹

Mothers played a unique role in their daughters' pathway into domestic service, due—in large part—to the gendered nature of the work. They were sometimes accused by the servant-seeking classes of actively discouraging their daughters from taking up the occupation or simply not encouraging them enough to participate in housework. In defending teachers against accusations that they were advising girls against domestic service, Laura Shore, who described herself as a schoolmistress of 24 years, stated that teachers readily advised mothers on how to get their daughters into service. She described mothers' responses as varying from their daughters' complete lack of interest in domestic work to the extent to which the mothers did all the domestic work without demanding their daughters' help. This led Miss Shore to conclude her letter with the 'respectful' suggestion that, in discouraging girls from taking up domestic work, 'the fault [lay] nearer home than school'.⁸²

In addition to initiating them into domestic work, mothers were also expected to guard their daughters' morality. While the 'high levels of control' that mothers exerted over their children before WWI became less stringent after the war, as Lucy Delap asserts, mothers were often

81 Ibid.

82 Laura Shore, 'Training Domestic Servants', *Times* (London), 19 June 1936, 139.

still implicated in, especially, their daughters' moral failings.⁸³ As a result, mothers sometimes turned to domestic service, which had long since been seen as a means to instil moral discipline in 'wayward and troublesome girls'.⁸⁴ Female servant-employers and senior female servants were extended the authority of a parent and mandated with the role of moral protector over junior female servants that entered their employ.⁸⁵

On occasion, the threat to a daughter's 'moral health' was not from outside sources, but from within the family home. Irene Hudson, of Manchester, was sent into service by her mother in the 1920s as a direct response to her alleging sexual advances from her stepfather. In her later interview, the language she used to describe the situation was vague, euphemistic and indirect, but its inference of sexual harassment and abuse was clear. She described the ways he disguised the sexual with playful physicality towards her that still inflicted pain. She had thought that he did not know his own strength, that he was 'uncouth', but it was likely an expression of his frustration. Other times, she recognised his 'playfulness' for what it was:

He occasionally chased me 'round the house, and, I was a bit green, I was very green, but I wasn't as green as that ... so I told my mother the first time for which—this is the first time in my life—that she gave me a terrific slap across the face. Nearly knocked me senseless for telling lies. Well, the second time he did it, I think I got one on the other side of the face. I was absolutely terrified. And this time, she put an advertisement in the news. She got a hundred and twenty replies for a job for me, and it ended up with me going in service.⁸⁶

While the extent of Irene Hudson's stepfather's sexual assault was unclear, her husband confirmed that 'he insinuated that my wife was very good looking. I can imagine that ... it was a problem, you know'.⁸⁷ What was clear was the stepfather's verbal and emotional abuse. He belittled her, claiming she would 'end up on the streets' and that domestic service was

83 Delap, *Knowing Their Place*, 32.

84 Paula Bartley, *Prostitution: Prevention and Reform in England, 1860–1914* (London: Routledge, 2000), 94.

85 Delap, *Knowing Their Place*, 29.

86 Interview with Mrs Hudson.

87 Mr Hudson was present at the interview with Mrs Hudson.

all she was 'fit for'. He demanded that the five pounds of potatoes be 'done just right' as he walked into the house every night and prevented her leaving the house on Sundays or having friends visit.⁸⁸

Domestic service provided Irene Hudson with a haven from her oppressive home life. She not only found her first place of employment 'heaven' as it involved minimal housework and looking after a little girl who was 'absolutely a dream', she even described the physical experience of walking from her home to her employer's home 'like going to heaven'. She literally walked uphill from the dirt and industry of her working-class home to the greenery and fresh air of Higher Broughton.⁸⁹ Yet despite escaping physically, the emotional toll of her stepfather's bullying and her mother's rejection and emotional abandonment left Irene Hudson with indelible psychological scars. She started to internalise their behaviour towards her: 'you see, in the end, my treatment was such that I thought there must have been something really terrible about me'. This sense seemed to permeate her work life. She was repeatedly drawn to families who sought to control her as her own family did, that in the end 'I used to feel lower and lower and lower and lower, they were slowly crushing the life and spirit out of me'. One life event that countered this negative self-belief was her husband defying his family in marrying her, as they thought he was lowering himself in marrying a servant.⁹⁰

Economic imperatives were undoubtedly the main drivers for working-class parents pressing their daughters into domestic service. Moral concerns, however, played their part in the preference of mothers—as the gatekeepers of their children's morality—for domestic service over other occupations. A high value was still placed on the marriageability and respectability of young women at this time, demanding a vigilance about their moral behaviour that did not apply to boys or men. These gendered ideas around morality combined with the gendered nature of domestic service—especially 'live-in' service, with its long hours and limited opportunities for socialising—to produce a solution for working-class parents concerned for their daughters' moral wellbeing. Sexual vulnerability was inherent to residential domestic service, yet that did not prevent some parents from treating domestic service as a deterrent to immoral behaviour.

88 Interview with Mrs Hudson.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

Conclusion

Following WWI, women like Northwich-born Rose Mutch, who was proud of a family legacy of domestic service and felt it was ‘in [her] blood’, were swiftly being replaced by those like Mrs Arnold who was ‘determined that [her] children would never go into service’.⁹¹ Nevertheless, some working-class families played an active role in coercing their daughters into taking up domestic service when it was becoming an increasingly unpopular occupation. While elements of a family history in service or the practical benefits of domestic service as training for a woman’s presumed future role in marriage remained, parents were more likely to be pushing their girls into paid domestic work for more pragmatic reasons and immediate concerns.

Their daughters’ employment in domestic service not only provided families with much-needed income, but the ‘live-in’ nature of the work, which was still the norm in the 1920s, provided the board and lodging that most new employment options did not. This remained a great boon to families who were struggling to house and feed all their children. And, as this article has shown, getting a daughter out from underfoot could separate her from the young men with which she might be tempted to fraternise and from men in her own home who posed a threat. The role of working-class parents in facilitating the perpetuation of domestic employment after WWI was likely small but clearly some did aid the British government’s attempts to address female unemployment through training and punitive measures to compel women to take up ‘hated domestic service’.⁹² While the government made decisions for working-class women as one homogenous group, the parents’ decisions—which were not necessarily made in the daughter’s best interest—were based on the specific circumstances of their family and their daughter. Their decision-making was informed by working-class economic realities and gendered moralities that were worlds apart from the government’s motivations.

91 Domestic Service Interview with Mrs Rose Delena Mutch, 27 January 1975, GB131.1103, Manchester Studies 5, TLSAC, Ashton-under-Lyne; Interview with Mrs Arnold.

92 Beddoe, *Home and Duty*, 49.

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