



Taylor & Francis  
Taylor & Francis Group

---

Domestic Servants and Households in Victorian England

Author(s): Edward Higgs

Source: *Social History*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (May, 1983), pp. 201-210

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4285250>

Accessed: 18-06-2015 17:22 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Taylor & Francis, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Social History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Edward Higgs

# Domestic servants and households in Victorian England

The creation of surplus labour on the one side corresponds to the creation of minus labour, relative idleness (or *not-productive* labour at best), on the other. This goes without saying as regards capital itself; but also holds then also for the classes with which it shares; hence of the paupers, flunkeys, lickspittles, etc. living from the surplus product, in short, the whole train of retainers; the part of the servant class which lives not from capital but from revenue.<sup>1</sup>

Since Marx many historians have treated domestic servants as emblems of social status.<sup>2</sup> What servants actually did has been of secondary importance to who they did for. Taking their cue from Banks' treatment of domestics as part of the middle-class 'paraphernalia of gentility', historians have tended to examine the subject in terms of the social relationship between master and servant.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in Theresa McBride's *The Domestic Revolution* there is not a single chapter devoted to the work which servants actually performed and much prominence is given to such questions as urban migration, social mobility and the structure of the middle-class household.<sup>4</sup>

This approach to the subject has been criticized recently, notably in an article by Dr Prochaska.<sup>5</sup> He argues cogently that the employment of servants did not necessarily indicate middle-class status. The wages of domestic servants quoted by Banks and others are based on the evidence of household manuals and newspaper advertisements, and make no allowance for the large number of girls recruited from the workhouse, who were paid little, if anything.<sup>6</sup> As Prochaska suggests, many members of the middle classes did not employ living-in servants, and many servant employers were not middle class, on the basis of occupational or financial criteria. Since it was possible to obtain a female from the workhouse for domestic work and pay her practically nothing, such employment was hardly a form of conspicuous consumption.<sup>7</sup> However, this still leaves us with the

<sup>1</sup> K. Marx, *Grundrisse, Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* (1973), 401.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, H. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1880* (1969), 143; J. F. C. Harrison, *The Early Victorians, 1832-1851* (1971), 110.

<sup>3</sup> J. A. Banks, *Prosperity and Parenthood* (1954), 86-102.

<sup>4</sup> T. McBride, *The Domestic Revolution*

(1976).

<sup>5</sup> F. K. Prochaska, 'Female philanthropy and domestic service in Victorian England', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, LIV (1981), 79-85.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Banks, *op. cit.* 70-85; P. Horn, *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* (Dublin and New York, 1975), 124-32.

<sup>7</sup> Prochaska, *op. cit.* 82-3.

questions of who actually employed servants and for what purposes. Also, if workhouse inmates could be employed at board cost, why did manuals of household economy and newspapers quote wages of ten pounds per annum as the standard rate for general servants in the mid-nineteenth century?

Historians of the subject have failed to ask these questions, in part because of the limitations of their sources. The domestic servant population was vast, and distributed in small units throughout the whole country. It created no unions or other expressions of collective discontent, which could have attracted the attention of Parliament or social scientists. This was especially so when the unit of employment was that inviolate institution, the Englishman's home. Consequently, the domestic economy of the nineteenth-century household is *terra incognita* for modern historians, who have had to rely on aggregate tables in the census reports, household manuals and anecdotes for their information.

It is unwise to write the history of Victorian service from these sources, although this has not prevented the attempt. The occupational tables in the nineteenth-century census reports are of dubious validity. They contain aggregates which mask local variations and changes over time, and can tell us very little about the internal workings of servant-employing households. Historians have failed to allow for the inconsistencies between the means of calculating the number of servants at differing censuses. Thus, McBride's contention that domestic service reached its apogee, as a percentage of the total employed population, in the 1891 census, is based on a misunderstanding.<sup>8</sup> The 1891 figure was inflated by a perverse decision to include with domestics all those female relatives returned in the census as employed in 'helping at home', performing 'housework', and so on.<sup>9</sup> W. E. Armstrong has used Charles Booth's papers to rearrange the census categories in an attempt to iron out these inconsistencies, and this work has been elaborated by Ebery and Preston.<sup>10</sup> Their figures indicate that the apogee of the servant population in the census was in 1871; a conclusion which is, of course, in direct contradiction to the prevailing belief that the First World War represented a watershed in servant employment.<sup>11</sup> However, it must be added that these figures are not an accurate measurement of the number of servants living in the homes of paying employers since an incalculable, but possibly large, number of these domestics were living and working in the homes of their relatives.<sup>12</sup>

Sources from the 'micro-level' of servant employment, the records of individual households, give no more accurate a picture of the common reality of domestic service. By the very fact of their survival, detailed household accounts and the reminiscences of servants and employers are not representative of the generality of Victorian households. Thus, of the sixty-two servant employers quoted

<sup>8</sup> McBride, *op. cit.*, 14, 36.

<sup>9</sup> See W. A. Armstrong, 'The use of information about occupation', in E. A. Wrigley (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Society* (Cambridge, 1972), 245.

<sup>10</sup> Armstrong, *op. cit.*, 226–310; M. Ebery and B. Preston, *Domestic Service in late Victorian and Edwardian England, 1871–1914*

(Reading, 1976).

<sup>11</sup> A. Marwick, *The Deluge: British Society and the First World War* (1967), 97, 273.

<sup>12</sup> See E. J. Higgs, 'The tabulation of occupations in the nineteenth-century census, with special reference to domestic servants', *Local Population Studies*, 28 (1982).

extensively by Pamela Horn in *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant* over 60 per cent were members of the titled or landed classes, as were a similar proportion of the employers mentioned by the servants whose reminiscences appear in Burnett's *Useful Toil*.<sup>13</sup> It is most unlikely that even this body could have employed the 600,000 domestics required to make their prominence in these works proportional to their role as servant masters.

To fall back on the evidence of manuals of domestic economy, as do practically all historians of this subject, is equivalent to using *Vogue* to reconstruct the life-style of the 'typical' modern family. Such manuals reflected the aspirations, if not the day-dreams, of Victorians, rather than the detailed workings of their homes.<sup>14</sup>

There has also been a fundamental ideological reluctance to regard the work of female domestic servants, and of women in the home generally, as of economic importance. Marx certainly did not regard such work as 'productive' in the sense of producing surplus value. Subsequent students of the question have failed to examine the content of domestic work, or to link changes in the number of servants to changes in the technology of cooking, heating and generally servicing the household plant. Nor have they systematically studied the manner in which such functions have tended to move out of the home and into the factory, and the effect which this movement has had on the size of the servant population.

This article is not intended as a theoretical discussion of the nature of female employment in the home. It would be useful, however, if such employment could be seen as productive, and indeed central to the reproduction of the fabric of society. As many Marxist and non-Marxist contributors to the domestic labour debate have pointed out, females do produce use values in the home, whether or not one can see these as 'productive' in the sense of capitalist accumulation.<sup>15</sup> By performing such labour, women maintain the efficiency of the workforce and so contribute to the economic system. Such work may not be paid for, or enter the capitalist labour market, but it does take place, and its technology and its relationship to similar work performed in the market sector is of vital importance to an understanding of the social position of women. Nordhaus and Tobin's attempt to calculate the total level of 'economic welfare' in the United States economy, which includes female labour in the home, indicates that the latter can be estimated as equivalent to 50 per cent of the Gross National Product of the USA

<sup>13</sup> Horn, *passim*; *Useful Toil*, ed. J. Burnett (1974).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of this matter see P. Branca, *Silent Sisterhood: Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Home* (1975), 22–36.

<sup>15</sup> See J. Gardiner, 'Women's domestic labour', *New Left Review*, LXXXIX (1975); J. Gardiner, 'The political economy of domestic labour in capitalist society', in D. L. Barker and S. Allen (eds), *Dependence and Exploitation in Work and Marriage* (1976); J. Gardiner, S. Himmelweit and M. Mackintosh, 'Women's domestic labour', *Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists*, IV, 2

(1975); S. Himmelweit and S. Mohun, 'Domestic labour and capital', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, I (1977); J. Harrison, 'Political economy of housework', *Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists*, IV, 1 (1973); W. Seccombe, 'The housewife and her labour under capitalism', *New Left Review*, LXXXIII (1974); W. Seccombe, 'Domestic labour – reply to critics', *New Left Review*, XCIV (1975); M. Coulson, B. Magas and W. Wainwright, 'The housewife and her labour under capitalism – a critique', *New Left Review*, LXXXIX (1975).

in the years since the Second World War.<sup>16</sup> In other words, one would need to add half again to the current calculations of wealth based solely on the use values paid for in the capitalist market in order to include the productive work of women in the home.

In the absence of such a perspective, alterations in the size of the servant population have been seen in terms of the changing expectations of employers and employees, in isolation from the work process. The 'fall of the Victorian servant' in the late nineteenth century has been regarded by Banks as a function of declining middle-class demand during the Great Depression. The financial difficulties experienced by such families in the period are supposed to have encouraged them to limit the size of their families, and household labour requirements, in order to maintain the expensive 'paraphernalia of gentility' to which they had become accustomed.<sup>17</sup> McBride has elaborated this argument by including the effects of increasing 'middle-class emphasis on domesticity' which encouraged closer ties between parents and children, and thus reduced the possible role of domestics.<sup>18</sup> Most scholars have posited the availability of other, more attractive, employment for women in the late nineteenth century as the cause of a declining supply of servants.<sup>19</sup>

There is, in fact, no evidence for a decline in the middle-class demand for servants, but the arguments of the 'supply school', although probably nearer the mark, are unhistorical. Banks's reasoning is circular since he posits a decline in servant numbers, one of the components of his 'paraphernalia of gentility', as a result of middle-class attempts to maintain that level of conspicuous consumption. At the same time his own figures reveal that middle-class incomes were not falling during the Great Depression, rather that the rate of increase was slowing down.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the source he quotes as evidence of the declining middle-class birth rate indicates that the middle classes were probably limiting their fertility in the 1850s, when the number of servants appears to have been rising.<sup>21</sup> McBride's argument, apart from being unsupported by any evidence, falters on the relative longevity of the institution of the British nanny, when other types of domestic service had all but disappeared. If middle-class demand for servants was declining we would not expect the indices of servant wages, imperfect as they may be, to show a rise, relative to other rates for female employment, in the late Victorian period.<sup>22</sup> Nor can we explain why the 'Servant Question' was such a pressing matter for debate in these years. The belief that alternative employment was drawing away potential domestics is based on misleading census data, fails to explain why such employment appeared preferable, and is merely another way of saying that female employment

<sup>16</sup> W. M. D. Nordhaus and J. Tobin, *Is Growth Obsolete? U.S.A. National Bureau of Economic Research. Economic Research: Retrospect and Prospect. Fiftieth Anniversary Colloquium. V. Economic Growth* (New York, 1972).

<sup>17</sup> Banks, *op. cit.*, 195–6.

<sup>18</sup> McBride, *op. cit.*, 67.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Ebery and Preston, *op. cit.* 21; Horn, *op. cit.* 24; McBride, *op. cit.* 111.

<sup>20</sup> Banks, *op. cit.* 132.

<sup>21</sup> J. W. Innes, *Class Fertility Trends in England and Wales, 1876–1934* (Princeton, 1938), 43, 65–6.

<sup>22</sup> W. T. Layton, 'Changes in the wages of domestic servants during fifty years', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, LXXI (1908), 523.

patterns in 1911 were not the same as in 1851. This is an attempt to explain historical change by merely noting that 'things' alter over time. This argument also ignores the relationship between the domestic and non-domestic production of goods and services. As I hope to indicate here, 'alternative' employment in the late Victorian period may merely represent changes in the location of employment; that is, the movement of production out of the home, rather than the creation of new work for women.

In order to come to a better understanding of the reality of domestic service, and of the household as a productive unit, we require detailed studies of a representative sample of households. These could take the form of complementary local studies of domestic activities in homes of known size, wealth and social status. Such research would be very difficult to undertake for nineteenth-century England and Wales, given the paucity of record sources or, at best, their heavy social bias. A poor substitute is to attempt to reconstruct some of the aggregate characteristics of servant and servant-employing populations in contrasting localities from the manuscript census schedules. Having taken a one-in-four random sample of all households containing persons in servant occupations in the industrial registration district of Rochdale in the years 1851, 1861 and 1871, and in rural Rutland in 1871, it is possible to ask specific questions along these lines.<sup>23</sup> Since this source gives us details of household structures and the sex, age, occupation and birthplaces of servants, a comparison of such data from two contrasting areas gives a much clearer picture of the social and economic role of domestic service.

Initially, the most striking fact revealed by these samples is that 'domestic servants' (those described as housekeepers, general servants, and so on, in the schedule columns reserved for occupational data) were not exclusively resident in the homes of paying employers. In Rochdale in 1871 only one-third of such persons in the sample were described as 'servant' in the schedule column giving the relationship of the individual to the head of the household. The majority of the remainder were living in the homes of relatives. Many were plainly also working there, especially the large number of 'housekeepers' who were the heads of households or their wives. Others may have been working as domestics in one or several other households during the day.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in Rutland over a quarter of all 'servants' lived with persons who were not their employers, as defined above. I have argued elsewhere that many of these people, either working at home or in a form of paid domestic work which did not involve legal subordination to an employer as *paterfamilias*, found their way into the official census tabulations as domestic servants.<sup>25</sup>

Many of the 'housekeepers' referred to here were, of course, simply women keeping the house, or 'housewives'. Indeed, some census enumerators tended to use the terms interchangeably. It would appear, however, that such women were

<sup>23</sup> Samples drawn from the 1871 census returns for the Rochdale registration district and Rutland, Public Record Office, RG 10/3299-306, 4112-132. Rochdale in 1851 and 1861, HO 107/2244-7, RG 9/3032-51.

<sup>24</sup> E. J. Higgs, 'Domestic Servants and Households in Rochdale, 1851-1871' (unpublished University of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1979), 48-84.

<sup>25</sup> Higgs (1982).

tabulated as domestic servants in the mid-nineteenth-century census. In Rochdale in 1851, for example, the one-in-four household sample included sixty-six 'housekeepers' aged twenty years or over, of whom no fewer than fifty-four were either female household heads or the wives and female relations of male heads. If one multiplies this figure by four to achieve an estimate of the number of 'housekeepers' of this age in all households with servants, the result is a figure of 264. The census report for 1851 contains the equivalent figure of 262 'housekeepers' tabulated as domestic servants.<sup>26</sup> In the absence of the instructions to the clerks who tabulated the results of the census in the Census Office in London in the years 1851 and 1861, we cannot be sure how such 'housekeepers' were treated. The Rochdale results for 1851 strongly suggest that all such women were classed as servants. We are on safer ground in 1871 when the surviving 'Instructions to the Clerks' state explicitly that,

When a Sister, Daughter, or other *female relative, of any age*, is described as 'Housekeeper', 'Servant', 'Governess', &c., she must be referred to those occupations.<sup>27</sup>

The implications that this has for the study of domestic service from the census tables are, of course, very serious.

As Prochaska has pointed out, the employers of servants and the members of the 'middle and upper classes' (however one defines these terms) were not two mutually inclusive groups. In the case of Rochdale, nearly one-third of all the households headed by members of the major professions, or by employers of over twenty-four hands (corresponding to Armstrong's Social Economic Group 1),<sup>28</sup> contained no living-in servant on census night.<sup>29</sup> Many will have employed some of the numerous 'servants' who resided with their kin. However, some of the above householders expressly described their own relatives as undertaking domestic duties at home. The proportion of servant employers amongst the minor professions, small manufacturers, farmers and large retailers (Armstrong's Social Economic Group 2) would have been smaller. It must also be remembered that some working-class women employed household help in the form of 'child minders'.<sup>30</sup>

Armstrong's socio-economic classification is open to numerous criticisms. It grades employers, for example, by the number of their stated employees and so cannot cope with those who failed to give this information. It also lumps together in the highest class professions such as accountancy, architecture, the Church and

<sup>26</sup> *Parliamentary Papers*, 1852-3, LXXXVIII, pt. II, Census of Gt Britain, 1851; Population Tables II, 645.

<sup>27</sup> Public Record Office, RG 27/4, Item 85. The author is currently engaged in an examination of the administrative history of the nineteenth-century occupational census.

<sup>28</sup> For a description of this method of social stratification see Armstrong, *op. cit.*, 198-225.

<sup>29</sup> Based on an analysis of all Social

Economic Group 1 households in the 1871 census returns for the registration district of Rochdale, P.R.O. RG 10/4112-32.

<sup>30</sup> See, for evidence of this phenomenon, M. Hewitt, *Wives and Mothers in Victorian Industry* (1958), 24; M. Brayshaw, 'Depopulation and changing household structure in the mining communities of west Cornwall, 1851-1871', *Local Population Studies*, xxv (1980), 32-3.

dentistry, all of which had very different status in the mid-nineteenth century. Out of the 325 families in the Rochdale census enumerators' books identifiable as being in Armstrong's Social Economic Group 1, a third were employers of more than twenty-four hands, and clergymen, doctors, bankers, magistrates and the legal profession made up another third. A further 20 per cent were a mixed collection of property-owners of various descriptions, and surveyors, civil engineers, accountants, architects, share brokers and one army officer completed the group. These occupational groups showed very different propensities for employing living-in servants. Doctors and lawyers almost always employed such servants, but half of the accountants did not. Surprisingly, only thirty-seven out of sixty-one clergymen employed living-in servants, although there was a high servant-employing ratio amongst the clergy of the established church. Equally surprisingly, out of the seven architects only one did not employ a living-in servant. Amongst the largest sub-group, employers with more than twenty-four hands, forty out of 107 did not employ such domestics. The very largest employers, such as John Bright, invariably employed them, but one can still find a man such as Henry Lord, a cotton spinner employing 200 hands, without a living-in servant. His near neighbour, John Garside of Newbold House, a cotton spinner with 160 hands and a family of nine children, was similarly bereft of such middle-class trappings, but his eldest daughter Mary, aged nineteen, 'Assists in house'.

The Rochdale sample also reveals that 16 per cent of the 279 heads of households containing living-in servants were artisans, clerks or semi-skilled and unskilled workers (Armstrong's Social Economic Group 3-5, excluding retailers). Amongst these were joiners, 'overlookers', weavers and labourers. In Rutland the equivalent figure was 13 per cent out of 153 householders. It is, therefore, unwise to use servant employment as a measurement of middle-class status, or to claim that a rise in the number of domestics represents a rise in the wealth of this social stratum. However, if we cannot define the 'middle classes' with any strict accuracy in this period, is the term of any methodological use?

Contrary to what Banks suggests, on the basis of household manuals, the number of servants employed by a family was not automatically determined by its income.<sup>31</sup> As we have seen, some well-to-do households may have spent nothing at all on this item. Even those households which did employ servants could choose to spend more or less of their incomes to meet their own needs, rather than follow the dictates of Mrs Beeton. Thus, of seven randomly chosen retailers and merchants who appeared in the Court of Bankruptcy between 1822 and 1833, and whose annual income had been between £500 and £1,000, the average proportion of the family income spent on servants was 4.2 per cent. However, the highest proportion was 15.5 per cent and the lowest was 1.1 per cent.<sup>32</sup> Factors affecting the choice of employing servants, and how many, must have included the family size, the number of potential household workers in the family, crises such as widowhood or childbirth, the amount of entertainment undertaken, the relative efficiency of

<sup>31</sup> Banks, *op. cit.*, 74.

<sup>32</sup> P.R.O. B 3.



the household plant, the availability of manufactured commodities such as polishes, starch, pickles, jams and so on.<sup>33</sup> We therefore need to know far more about the home as a productive, rather than a consumptive unit, before we can study these matters in detail.

However, many servants clearly lived in households which were places of commercial business; that is, in farms and shops. Thus, in the Rochdale sample over a third of all servant employers were either farmers or retailers. In Rutland the equivalent figure was nearly 60 per cent. Many farmers and retailers may have employed servants for purely domestic work, as distinct from agricultural or retailing tasks. However, in small businesses such a demarcation can hardly have been viable, especially when the site of the home and the business coincided. It should also be noted that in the Rutland sample the group of households with the largest number of servants was headed by schoolteachers living in Uppingham. These were the houses of the local public school. Evidence from the records of the Rochdale Board of Guardians on the employment of workhouse girls reveals the dual functions of such servants. When Lazarus Collinge, a confectioner of Heywood, employed a workhouse girl on 9 May 1851 it was 'to learn his trade and perform domestic duties'. In another case a baker employed a girl as 'a servant', but on 11 May 1866 she was reported as selling bread and cakes in the streets late at night.<sup>34</sup>

If members of the 'middle classes' did not have to spend any money on domestics, and if they did, were not obliged to pay the rates quoted in Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management*, why did such high wage rates appear in such manuals and in newspaper advertisements? Similarly, how could the decline in the rural population undermine the servant market, as Prochaska suggests, if alternative sources of supply existed in the workhouses? The answer may be that urban women, including urban workhouse inmates, were not regarded as suitable for domestic employment. Their knowledge of job opportunities in the urban labour market, the proximity of friends and relations, and their prejudices against social subordination, may have made them less likely than rural girls to accept the irksome restrictions of life in an employer's home.<sup>35</sup> Compare, for example, the favourable attitude to domestic service of Flora Thompson's rural population in *Lark Rise to Candleford* with the distaste expressed to the Domestic Service Sub-committee of the women's Advisory Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction after the First World War.<sup>36</sup> Rural women were generally regarded as the best servants, not the cheapest, and as being more willing to accept their position of social subordination because of their lack of access to the urban labour market. Thus in Rochdale in 1871 it was the highest classes of servant employers who employed the highest proportion of rural migrants, whilst the demand for cheap workhouse labour was overwhelmingly on the part of small shopkeepers and artisans.<sup>37</sup> This would explain the two wage rates and the collapse of domestic service as a consequence of rural decline.

This decline must also be seen within the context of the home as a productive

<sup>33</sup> Higgs (1979), 158–204.

<sup>34</sup> Lancashire Record Office, PUR 7.

<sup>35</sup> Higgs (1979), 209–40.

<sup>36</sup> F. Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford* (1973), 155; P.R.O. RECO 1/881.

<sup>37</sup> Higgs (1979), 209–12, 305–13.

unit. It is surely incorrect to assume, as many have done, that the rise of new job opportunities outside the home was unconnected with the results of this dwindling of the servant population. Indeed they may have been intimately connected. The replacement of expensive household labour by consumer durables and attendant alterations in middle-class mores (including an expansion of entertaining in restaurants and cafés),<sup>38</sup> the increased use of processed foods and commercial laundry facilities, may all have provided potential domestics with the opportunity to perform functions outside the middle-class home formerly carried on within it. Lastly, we cannot be certain what deleterious effects the rising cost of high-quality household labour had on the family shop, and if this encouraged the contemporary expansion of chain and lock-up stores.<sup>39</sup> Thus, we cannot be certain to what extent the 'rise' of employment in retailing<sup>40</sup> reflects the differentiation of this activity out of household production, with a merely formal replacement of 'general servants' by 'shop assistants' in the census. We might thus speculate on the extent to which the 'commercial revolution' of the late nineteenth century, especially the rise of the service industries, was not the development of new types of work in society, but merely the performance of existing work in a new setting. This much vaunted expansion might in consequence be a statistical illusion.<sup>41</sup>

It is necessary to approach the history of domestic service from a fresh standpoint. Only by shifting the emphasis from the home as a unit of conspicuous consumption (or gross underconsumption) to the home as a unit of production can we rescue this institution from the historians of social ideologies or 'superstructures'.

The tendency in current works on domestic service is to concentrate on its social role, the social relationship between master and servant, and to explain changes in one by changes in the other. Thus the decline in servant numbers is seen as part of a change in the middle-class ideal of domestic life. Indeed, the role of women in society generally is seen in terms of ideals of femininity. Little attempt has been made to integrate ideology and economic structure. As Leonore Davidoff has pointed out, however, the home was not simply a place of inactivity where women played out an elaborate game of femininity for their husbands. The home could be an economic unit, as in the case of lodging houses,<sup>42</sup> and changes in the technology of housework or the degree of dependence on the market place for commodities could have fundamental effects on the ideals of womanhood and domesticity.<sup>43</sup> Above all, although women in the home, whether wives or servants,

<sup>38</sup> L. Davidoff, *The Best Circles. Society, Etiquette and the Season* (1973), 87–9.

<sup>39</sup> For a description of this expansion see J. B. Jeffreys, *Retail Trading in Britain, 1850–1950* (Cambridge, 1954), 36.

<sup>40</sup> For measurements of the extent of this 'rise' see Ebery and Preston, *op. cit.*, 20–1.

<sup>41</sup> For allusions to this expansion see A. E. Musson, 'British industrial growth 1873–96: a balanced view', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, xvii (1964), 402; C. Wilson, 'Economy and society in late Victorian

Britain', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, xviii (1965), 183–98.

<sup>42</sup> L. Davidoff, 'The separation of home and work? Landladies and lodgers in nineteenth and twentieth-century England', in S. Burman (ed.), *Fit Work for Women* (1979), 64–97.

<sup>43</sup> L. Davidoff, 'The rationalisation of housework', in D. L. Barker and S. Allen (eds), *Dependence and Exploitation in Work and Marriage* (1979), 121–51.

were supposed to be the embodiment of a feminine ideal, that ideal included the performance of certain types of work associated with childbearing, the preparation of food and the maintenance of work discipline amongst the household staff.<sup>44</sup> The social role of women can thus be seen to spring from the restrictions inherent in their economic role in household productions; that women in the nineteenth century were subordinate because their work isolated them from each other and from the means to power through mass institutions, such as trade unions, or through control of capitalist enterprises. A history of women in the nineteenth century which ignores the content of women's work in the home and changes in its technology ignores the vital relationship between the economic and social roles of women. The position of women in the nineteenth century was defined not simply by gender but by gender-defined work. As such, changes in the technology or venue of such labour altered the social position of women as much as changes in the ideology of femininity and the family.

*Public Record Office*

<sup>44</sup> L. Davidoff, 'Mastered for life: servant and wife in Victorian and Edwardian England', *Journal of Social History* (Summer 1974), 406–28.