

Life as a lady's maid

On Wednesday 20th August, the Woodhouse Eaves WI held their monthly meeting. After important updates about future events, feedback from the monthly WI clubs and enjoying tea and biscuits, members settled back to listen to Jo Golby describing life as a lady's maid around the beginning of the twentieth century.



Jo set the scene by introducing Lady Mary Curzon, an American heiress who, from an early age, had been brought up with the aim of marriage into the English nobility. She did not find a husband on her first three-month visit to England but then met George Nathaniel Curzon in Washington on her return to the USA. He was fifteen years older than Mary, was an MP and was embarking on extensive travels to Russia, Asia and Afghanistan. She agreed to marry him on his return as long as he did not contract any disease whilst he was abroad.

Mary was introduced to Daisy Greville, Countess of Warwick, who advised Mary on aspects of English life, including how to make friends and how she should have a personal dressmaker. Mary discovered a dressmaker called Violet in London who proved skilful at making dresses to Mary's requirements. As Mary was having trouble finding a hairdresser, she decided it would be a sensible idea to have a maid who could be trained to do her hair properly. She suggested to Daisy that Violet would be a good choice, but Daisy was horrified at the idea as Violet had a strong Black Country accent! Daisy said the best lady's maids were French, but they were very much in demand. Mary was adamant that Violet would be the perfect maid for her, so she paid for Violet to go to France for three years to improve her language and elocution.



On his return from Afghanistan, George Curzon married Mary on 22nd April 1895. When George was not working abroad, they lived at the family home of Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire.

As Lady Mary Curzon's personal maid, Violet enjoyed many perks. She had her own room at Kedleston Hall and was allowed to have personal effects. Her candle allowance was four beeswax candles a month, which enabled her to read and sew when not attending to her mistress's needs. Violet received a tea allowance and was served pudding every day, unlike the other servants! She could alter her mistress's cast-off gowns to make dresses for herself. She was paid around £35 a year but had no living expenses, as she would accompany Mary at all times and live with the Curzons when George was working abroad.

Violet's responsibilities were to look after Mary's clothes and alter them if necessary so that the wrists, ankles and the nape of the neck were hidden. She would dress Mary's hair into the elaborate fashions of the day. A lady in Mary's position would change her outfit six times a day and Violet would help her change, in particular lacing her corset which fastened at the back. There would be a different corset for different activities, and each change of outfit would take up to an hour. When the ladies retired after a lengthy banquet, Violet would have refreshing iced water to hand and would have prepared pads soaked in a lemon balm solution to refresh under the arms before the ladies were summoned by a gong to the ballroom.

Jo finished her talk by instructing us in the language of the fan – how to encourage an admirer, deter unwanted attention and warn off rivals! She had given each one of us a fan to practise our fan signals and explained that fans from different places were collected by lady's maids as a way of showing off how widely they had travelled.



The meeting ended with a vote of thanks to Jo for an informative and entertaining talk enjoyed by all.

Judith Harrison