



‘The Real Downton Abbey’

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1. Overview document

Life in the English Country House has long been a subject of fascination. The huge houses of the upper classes of English society, complete with gardens, lands and lots of servants, represent a way of life that few of us will ever experience. Recent television programmes, such as *Downton Abbey*, present a happy and content view of the country house complete with cheery domestics, friendly aristocrats, fabulous parties and the facing of personal and national tragedy with quiet acceptance. But was country house life really like that? Over the course of this module we will focus on a number of different aspects of life in the English Country House between 1870 and 1960. During this period the English Country House changed almost beyond recognition – large country estates became impractical, unmanageable and, as time wore on, far too expensive to maintain. The period was full of events which forced the English aristocracy to change, including two World Wars. Focusing on a series of country houses, we will examine in detail what living in them was really like and consider the impact of wider events on their residents, both above and below stairs. We will use a variety of source material contrasting real and fictionalised accounts of life in the English Country House, including *Downton Abbey*, *Upstairs, Downstairs* and P. G. Wodehouse's *Blandings*. We will also look at presentations of English Country Houses from the period by organisations such as the National Trust and English Heritage.

Session plan:

Session one – Origins of the Country House (history; architecture; function)

Session two – The People of the Country House (social life; servants and masters; social change)

Session three – The decline of the Country House (World Wars; destruction and demolition; birth of the National Trust)

Resource pack:

1. Overview document with resource lists and tasks
2. Glossary of key terms used
3. Reading: Girouard, Mark, 'The Power Houses' in Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 1 – 12 as pdf.
4. Watching: Links to Hatfield House servant videos (YouTube)
5. Exploring: Downton Abbey character image – image as pdf.

2. Glossary:

Above Stairs – a phrase commonly used to refer to the space in the upper part of the Country House lived in by the homeowner and their family

Aristocracy – members of British Society who have an 'hereditary' title (Duke, Earl, Lord)

Attic – space in the house immediately below the roof; often the place where servants had their bedrooms

Baize Door – a door which connects the upper (above stairs) and lower (below stairs) parts of a Country House

Below Stairs – a phrase commonly used to refer to the space in the lower part of the Country House lived in by the servants

Boudoir – another term for a bedroom (above stairs)

Classical style – also called 'Neo-classicism': a style of architecture which uses motifs from the classical age of Greece and Roman (BC), such as columns, pediments and porticos

Columns – large carved pillars; an example of a classical motif

Country Estate – an expanse of land which is owned by one landowner and which has a main house and other buildings – farms, cottages, villages, towns

Country House – a large house in its own grounds, also referred to as a 'stately home'

Courtyard – outside space at the Country House, paved over, used for outdoor work, or as an entry space for the horses stables

Day Service – the practice of servants coming into the house for the day to work, then going home at night to their own houses; opposite of 'live-in'

Domestic Service – the general role of those working as servants, serving with the house

Drawing Room – main daytime entertaining space in a Country House; usually a large room, richly furnished; replaced the earlier 'Salon'

Entail – a legal mechanism by which a Country House, its land and contents are linked together (as a ‘Country Estate’) and must be passed onto the heir

Heir – individual who stands to inherit the Country Estate and the title; usually, though not always the eldest son

Hereditary – term used to indicate that a ‘title’ is passed on to the next generation after death

Larder – food storage space, often used for prepared dishes; see also ‘pantry’

Live-in – the practice of servants living and working in the same house

Livery – the uniform worn by servants to indicate that they work for a particular homeowner

Neo-classical - a style of architecture which uses motifs from the classical age of Greece and Roman (BC), such as columns, pediments and porticos (see also: Classical style)

Palladianism – a style of building after the Italian architect Andre Palladio which became popular in England during the 1600s, 1700s and 1800s

Pantry – food storage space below stairs

Pediment – a row of columns placed together; an example of a classical motif

Peerage – British Peers, individuals with titles: Duke, Earl, Lord

Portico – a porch at the front of a house made from a pediment (columns); an example of a classical motif

Salon – main daytime entertaining space in a Country House; usually a large room, richly furnished – later this is replaced by the ‘Drawing Room’

Scullery – area below stairs where the washing up and general cleaning was done

Servant – individual who works in a service role with a house

Servants’ Quarters – the rooms where live-in servants slept; usually at the very top of the house in the attic or in a separate wing of the house

Stately Home – a large house in its own grounds, also referred to as a ‘Country House’

Table of Precedence – the list of ‘titles’ ranked by level and longevity which dictates Aristocratic (see ‘aristocracy’) position

Title – a ranked term placed in front of the name to indicate that an individual is a member of the ‘aristocracy’ or ‘peerage’, e.g. Duke, Earl, Lord. Titles are usually ‘hereditary’ and are linked to a specific ‘Country Estate’

Wing – used to refer to a part of the house which is in addition to the main block

3. Reading: Girouard, Mark, 'The Power Houses' in Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 1 – 12 (provided as pdf. attachment)

Task: read the book chapter. Make a note of anything which is unclear. Consider the following questions and make notes on your answers:

- a) What were Country Houses for?
- b) What, in Girouard's view, is a 'power house'?
- c) How did the Country House represent its owner? (use examples from Girouard's text)

4. Watching: Victorian Servants at Hatfield House (1846)

In 1846 Hatfield House received a Royal Visit from Queen Victoria. Task: watch this series of short videos about different servants and their duties.

Butler - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTOTRn6V5Vs>

Housekeeper - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKIcvVZtY48>

Porter - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzWUUh2PaY>

Kitchen Maid - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjGM4KN0Lo8>

Scullery Maid - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIOevBbfbFk>

Stillroom Maid - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7w8olw_GQ0U

Gardener - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMJTmRPlmNE>

5. Exploring: Downton Abbey character image

This image includes pictures of the characters in Downton Abbey towards the beginning of the series (1912). Task: Have a look at the different characters – how many do you already know?

Task: Compare the servant roles at Downton Abbey in 1912 with those from the Hatfield House videos, which represent servants in a Country House over sixty years earlier in 1846. Make notes: Which servant roles are the same? Are there any missing?