

Scissors Paper Stone

From Louth to Gladstone Rd: Where would you rather work?

Part II

This is an edited version of a talk given by Mary Grover for Scissors Paper Stone at St John's Ranmoor.

Gladstone Rd was developed chiefly in the 1870s and 80s, twenty or so years after the construction of Ranmoor's more palatial houses. There was a surge of servant employment in the 1850s and '60s peaking in the 1870s. This means that few newly rich employers would have grown up in a home with residential servants. A lack of confidence in domestic management skills at the time is reflected in the huge number of manuals for the management of servants, the most spectacularly successful being Mrs Beeton's 1861 manual on Household Management. These manuals tried to establish a norm or code but, as we have seen, Sheffield was notably resistant to codes.

The closer we look at these nine households in Gladstone Road, the more diverse they seem to be. It is difficult to discern any sort of norm of household management. But Census Returns and other documents give us clues as to the experience of these Ranmoor servants.

House number		Family	Servants
6	Joseph Wright - pawnbroker	9	2
7	James Dixon - silver /electro plate manfr	6	4 [c] [nn x 2]
8	George Sharman - grocer	3	2
9	Denys Hague - colliery owner	3	2 [c]
10	John Wright - pawnbroker ret'd	2	2 [n]
12	Joseph Ellison - manfr and merchant	2	2 [c]
13	Richard Garland - iron founder	3	3 [c]
14	Samuel Earnshaw Howell - steel manufr	7	5 [c, g, nn]
16	John Furniss - solicitor	4	2 [c]

In this summary of the households of Gladstone Road derived from the 1891 Census this is the picture we get. In the column describing the servants all are housemaids or generals unless given the following abbreviations:

- 'c' is for cook (six of them)
- 'g' is for governess (one of them)
- 'n' for medical nurse (one)
- 'nn' for nursery nurse (three)

Apart from the two Wright pawnbrokers, the heads of household in Gladstone Rd were middle-aged, in their forties or fifties, most at the pinnacle of their careers.

At number 10, the oldest of the Gladstone Rd residents was John Wright aged 69. He lived with his daughter, a general servant and a nurse whom I assume was hired on his behalf and not his daughter's. Such a relationship often led, understandably, to dependence, possibly friendship and sometimes gratitude. Bequests to nurses are not uncommon in the wills made late on in life. Very often, in their final years, rich residents of Ranmoor moved to the seaside (Devon, Blackpool and Scarborough are favourites) so the nurses to whom bequests are made were not longstanding servants but those who

had forged significant and recent bonds. In 1925 Samuel Howell left £500 to Louise White, a nurse from Warrington. Denys Hague at number 9, a 'colliery proprietor' moved to London in his final years. Sheffield servants are not remembered in his will but Hague is generous to medical institutions and personnel in London.

Twenty years later another resident of Gladstone Rd, Phebe Flather, remembered Lily Cushion, the servant with her till she died in 1918. Lily is unusual in many ways. She was probably highly literate and multi-skilled and she came from London. The daughter of a printer, she became a bookbinder in Suffolk before moving to Hathersage in 1901 to be a domestic servant, her skills as binder probably made obsolete by mechanisation. Though Phebe Flather made her will from The Elms in Gladstone Rd in 1915, she was probably being cared for by Lily in Phebe's Bridlington home. On Phebe's death in 1918, her daughter Laura Flather moved into the Bridlington house and continued to employ Lily, now described as a cook. On the death of Laura, Lily like Fanny North rejoined her family of origin, now in Norwich, where her father was born and where her brother and sister are tailors. Both Fanny North and Lily Cushion's careers have been relatively easy to track because their families of origin, though not prosperous, seem to have been supportive - offering accommodation when their serving days were over.



'Cleaning out the Grate' by Margaret Bennett, curator of the Unseen art exhibition which celebrated the domestic workers of Ranmoor St John's Church June 2025

Compared to cooks and housekeepers, the working lives of the general servant or 'General', on whom the majority of British employers depended are even harder to trace. 'Generals' had no designated role; the word 'general' legitimised any demand.

In a large household duties of each servant were usually clearly defined by a time-table of jobs such as was issued to this new under-housemaid in Shropshire in 1926. Between 6.30 and 8 am she was required to 'Prepare day nursery: shake out rug, clean grate, light fire, put out coal buckets, wash floor, dust furniture, lay table for nursery breakfast, clean children's shoes. Repeat in morning room.' We may be horrified at what she had to get through in the first hour and a half of the day but at least the list had an end. The demands on a general in Gladstone Road could have been limitless.

So which of these less grand households in Gladstone Rd might have offered a young woman a well-managed and secure environment in which she might survive and even thrive?

Joseph Wright No 6

Family (9)

Joseph Wright 67 Retired pawnbroker
 Lydia Wright 49
 Edith Wright 25
 Harold Wright 23 Clerk
 Francis Wright 21 Clerk
 Maud Wright 19
 Ernest Wright 17 Merchant's apprentice
 Henrietta Wright 14
 Charles Wright 13

Servants(2)

Annie Foy 17 – Sheffield [untraced]
 Kate Fell 19 – Ripley [Fatherless for previous 10 years at least - 1881 living in uncle's house with mother and 3 siblings]

The largest household was that of Joseph Wright's at number 6. Joseph was a retired pawnbroker and church warden at St John's - prosperous and with a certain social standing. He had 4 sons and 3 daughters, aged 13-25. Yet his large family relied for their comfort on two young women: Annie Fox, aged 17 and Kate Fell 19, one from Sheffield and the other from Derbyshire. Annie and Kate may have been assisted by 'dailies' and by washerwomen who took laundry in - we have no way of knowing. Lydia Wright herself was the daughter of a carver, engraver and tool manufacturer who is not on record as employing residential servants. So she and her daughters might well have taken a hand at cleaning out the grate, but not her four sons. I think I would have opted for a role in a house with a larger staff and fewer young male family members.

Each of the six of the childless households had two residential servants. George Sharman and his wife Mary have two, neither of them a cook. Sharman was a successful grocer and wine and spirit merchant, his wife probably the daughter of a publican but brought up on Manor Farm in Sheffield. Neither George nor Mary would have grown up managing domestic staff but having grown up in a working farm Mary would probably have had the skills to direct kitchen work and possibly work alongside her two servants.

There are three childless householders employing two servants, one of whom is a cook: Joseph Ellison, the steel manufacturer, Denys Hague, the enormously wealthy colliery owner and John Furniss, a solicitor.

Joseph Ellison's wife is the only one whose father is described in a marriage certificate as a Gentleman which suggests a man with servants at his beck and call. In fact he was an artist living in Ranmoor Cottage with one servant. His daughter Helen Thompson has the distinction of being the only person living in Gladstone Road in 1891 to actually come from Ranmoor. By far the majority of Ranmoor's new householders came from central or industrial areas of Sheffield, self-made men from the other side of town. Their wives tended to come from similar backgrounds. For all of them, home was a place to be constructed not inherited. Their relationships with their servants relied not on community norms but on individual negotiation.

Elizabeth, the wife of the lawyer John Furniss, was perhaps the best equipped of any of Gladstone Road's residents to manage her staff. She was the daughter of an hotelier from Scarborough.

One of the saddest households in Gladstone was that of Richard Garland, the successful iron founder. In 1858 Richard married Sarah Kitts, the daughter of an architect from Devon. They had 3 children. In 1861 the family is still together, living in Upperthorpe but at some time Sarah moves out living first in Parsons Cross and then in Otley as an 'annuitant' - presumably supported by her absent husband. In 1891 Richard is living in Gladstone Road with three servants including an experienced cook. In a household without a mistress the odds were that the cook, Annie Hunter, was in fact a housekeeper and had considerable power. She was a widow of 47 so would more likely to be the manager than the managed in the Garland household.

A capable women in such a position could capitalise on her position, especially if she was in a large and prosperous household. I am grateful to Sue Turner head of the General Cemetery archives who charted the career of one of Ranmoor's most successful female servants. Sarah Needham joined the household of Charles Firth in Riverdale House as a widow with children. She was invaluable to the family when Charles retreated to Bath suffering chronic gout, leaving Sarah as housekeeper of the mighty mansion. When Charles died in 1892 we find her in Fulwood Rd, housekeeper to Charles' son Archibald along with a physician. The fact that she was allowed to keep her children with her as she carried out these two responsible roles, is perhaps another example of the ways in which employer/employee relationships in Sheffield were, to a degree less rigidly policed by the social rule book than they might have been in Bath or Cheltenham where a servant's children might not have been given a home. However, Sarah Needham, Lily Cushion and Fanny North were exceptionally successful. Most of their colleagues lived more precarious lives.

The highest proportion of junior staff were young maids from the countryside.

Sheffield	69	Norfolk	2
Derbyshire	29	Salop	2
Lincolnshire	17	Yorkshire	2
Nottinghamshire	13	Cambridgeshire	1
West Riding	5	Cheshire	1
Leicestershire	5	Dumfriesshire	1
North Riding	4	Essex	1
Not Given	3	Hampshire	1
Middlesex	3	Hertfordshire	1
Bedfordshire	2	Northamptonshire	1
East Riding	2	Northumberland	1
Kent	2	Staffordshire	1
Lancashire	2	Suffolk	1
		Westmorland	1
Ireland	1		
Wales	1		
1891 Census:			

Keith Pitchforth has made a very revealing analysis of the origins of residential servants in Ranmoor parish. Of the 179 people identified as servants in the 1891 Census, 69 were from Sheffield and the remaining 110 were from the countryside outside the city.

I am always struck by the fact that though employers in Ranmoor were nearly all born in Sheffield the majority of their staff were economic migrants from disparate places across England at a time when dialect differences were much more marked. Lincolnshire country girls can have had no experience of an industrial city or of the people they would have called the 'frim-folk' -

those who lived beyond Lincolnshire's borders and spoke very differently. This solid looking suburb was in fact a hotchpotch of peoples from a wide variety of backgrounds who might have struggled to understand each other.

So how did these young girls find themselves in Sheffield in 1891?

My final blog looks at the origins of the domestic servants recruited from poor agricultural areas such as those to the north of Louth.

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