5. Class And Discrimination

Unpicking the social divide

The young academic and historian R.H. Tawney asserted in 1912, "there has rarely been a period when the existing social order was regarded with such dissatisfaction by so many intelligent and respectable citizens." He may have alluded to the division between capital and labour, struggle for voting equality, especially for women, efforts of Sidney and Beatrice Webb for a fairer society, end of aristocratic rule, demise of the country house, rise of the Liberal and Labour parties, huge expansion of professions and varying gradations of middle classes. With a fusion of these changing elements, somehow society seemed chaotic and disorganised.

Many shared the view of Hon. William Ormsby-Gore that the aftermath of war would bring the overthrow of economic and social order. Across Europe, stability had gone, to be replaced by uncertainty with revolution, civil war, anarchy, communism and fascism. At the 1918 general election, the Labour vote increased from 8% to 24%.

Working men started to use a jaunty vernacular with their superiors, blurring the social layers, almost unheard of pre-war. Those who had known their place, such as in domestic service, were no longer prepared to serve with servility. The voice of a mass industrialised workforce was articulated by trade unions with a doubling of membership from 4.1 million at the outset of war to 8.3 million in 1920, and a doubling of strike action too.

In *England After War*, a sequel to his 1909 study, C.F.G. Masterman opted for 'aristocracy', 'middle-class' and 'workmen' or 'feudalism', 'bourgeoisie', and 'workmen.' He had to admit the classifications were blurred post-war with many ex-officers returning to find no work, or only menial jobs. A decade later in *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley thought society was evolving into meritocratic and material which he classified into 'clever' professional 'alphas', obedient executive 'betas' and hard-working 'gammas.'

A later study in 1936, *The Condition of Britain* by G.D.H. & Margaret Cole simply divided the social order into 'rich, comfortable and poor.' It overcame a wide spectrum of wealthy upper classes and wealthy upper middle classes, now fused into the category of rich.

This manifested itself in the honours system too with the rich, powerful and famous getting knighthoods, those beneath becoming commanders and those at the bottom, officers and members with award of an OBE and MBE. Here were hierarchical honours for a society that was hierarchical, reinforced and accepted by the recognition system and importance of the British Empire. The social order was maintained for High Tories as it involved inherited wealth. Hilaire Beloc insisted "the structure of society demands stratification" and the ritual of titles. "Despite the decline of the aristocracy," insisted R.H. Tawney, "the cult of inequality" remained as strong as ever, affected by wealth, birth, position and circumstance.

Most attention focused on the middle. A.J.P. Taylor felt "the middle classes set the standards of the community" and "were its conscience and did its routine work." As with the Edwardian era this middle strata continued to expand. George Orwell noted "the upward and downward extension of the middle class: managers, salesmen, engineers, chemists and technicians of all kinds" and the "professional class of doctors, lawyers and teachers etc." Orwell concluded the tendency of advanced capitalism has been to enlarge the middle class and not to wipe it out.

The middle classes felt compressed by high taxation and threatened by militant trade unions, and communist agitators at home in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution. The 'Middle Class

Union' was formed in 1919, appealing to citizens that came between "the federated manual worker" and 'organised capital." The Daily Mail came to the rescue, reassuring readers they were the "people of the country," the backbone that made Britain tick. Soon the Express and Telegraph followed suit, appealing to middle Britain, albeit slightly to the right of centre.

From the aristocratic elite, Parliament and government were now distinctly bourgeoisie. Lloyd George brought in many businessmen such as Devenport, Beaverbrook and Geddes. All were drawn from this group inter-war: Bonar Law, was a steel manufacturer, Baldwin an ironmaster with a clutch of directorships, whilst Neville Chamberlain was a scion of one of Birmingham's great industrial dynasties, having spent the first part of his career in the city. He once said, "I come from the middle classes and I am proud of the ability, the shrewdness, the industry and providence by which they are distinguished." Tory grandees were unimpressed. Appeasement was denounced as the sort of spineless foreign policy one could expect from industrial roots.

Negative stereotyping came from within the middle classes too. Arnold Bennett in *Riceyman Steps* (1932) explored lower middle class meanness whilst George Orwell, from a higher social stratum, concluded middle classes were unimaginative and callous. These themes resonate in his "*A Clergyman's Daughte*r (1935), *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) and "*Coming Up for Air* (1939). Stereotyping also applied to a fledgling Communist Party in their views of society and the opinions of those looking in who saw it as a threat, only rivalled by fascism.

The Party held its first convention in London on 31 July & 1 August 1920, united by a hatred of capitalism and the perceived betrayal of workers' interests by corrupt ruling classes. Five months later the Party merged with the Workers' Socialist Federation led by Sylvia Pankhurst and ultra left of the Labour Party. Not only was there solidarity with British workers but with 'exploited people' of the British Empire.

The Workers' Weekly had a readership of 40,000 in 1925 with a circulation of around 100,000 for the Sunday Worker. The Party was prominent in the nine days General Strike of 1926 and mortified when a peace formula was agreed with imposition of revised terms and conditions. Miners were left to battle alone for seven months in a futile attempt to improve their lot. The Daily Worker first appeared on New Year's Day 1930 with a daily circulation of 30,000 and 100,000 at weekends. The class struggle in industry, the menace of fascism and support for Bolshevism featured regularly with much reporting too of the Jarrow 'Hunger March' of 1936.

Marxist ideology extended to economic thinking with Charterhouse educated Maurice Dobb. He joined the communist party in 1920 and became a Cambridge University lecturer. He held frequent communist meetings at home, known as the "Red House." It has been rumoured Dobb was a recruiting agent for Comintern, an organization committed to world communism.

The 'Cambridge ring of spies' was recruited in the 1930s: Anthony Blunt, Harold (Kim) Philby, Anthony Burgess, Donald MacLean and John Cairncross. As an Honorary Fellow of Trinity College, Anthony Blunt was well placed as talent spotter. Philby studied economics as part of his history degree. Dobb was his tutor. A planned economy, classless society and 'dialectical materialism,' (a fusion of science, nature and the human condition), appealed to Philby. He was "a rebel at heart," according to a master at his former School, Westminster.

A.M. Carr-Saunders & D. Caradog Jones examination of the *Social Structure of England* (1927) revealed no upper class. It was they said, "a mistake to speak of class divisions and class distinctions today." A decade later they were of the same opinion, citing dress, speech and use of leisure. J.B. Priestley shared these views. In housing, transport, morals, leisure and dress, society was becoming more homogenous, and 'without privilege.' Probing deeper,

differences did exist at either end of the spectrum, especially for the mass at the lower end, affected by lack of wealth, disposable income and status and by the social environment they had been brought up in, and now lived in.

It is helpful to broaden considerably David Carradine's interpretation of class between the wars and examine it from other standpoints. Of great importance is not only perceptions of class but the actuality and practical effects, influenced too by opportunity, or lack of it, and social mobility. The three Es of entrepreneurship, the 'establishment' and education amply illustrate, especially the latter with opportunity denied for most. Then there are occupations to consider including access, entry requirements, training, qualifications, old-boy networks, memberships, progression routes and so on. All these would impact quality of life too.

Capitalist proprietors, so evident in the 19th and 20th centuries, were on the wane, in favour of mass volume businesses and conglomerates with share capital rather than owner-managed. The production line and acquisitions & mergers illustrate with division of labour, assembly techniques, hierarchies and systematic operations, described by sociologist and economist Max Weber. Notable was the limited existence of formal apprenticeships and lack of work-based training so evident in Germany. Thanks to Lit & Phil Societies, Workers Educational Association and night schools there was an attempt to equip working people with knowledge and skills, but such efforts came largely from the voluntary sector, not the state.

No single definition exists of 'the establishment,' that conveys a shadowy organisation, yet the connections are both formal and loose. Constituents include government, parliament, press, the monarchy, judiciary and church. At first sight it appears classless. A skim through reveals widely differing educational backgrounds, types of occupation and seniority. These in turn do involve a form of hierarchy through power and influence. All members appeared equal but it was clear some were more equal than others, especially those attending Eton and Harrow in the premier league, rather than minor public schools.

The desire of George Orwell was the spread of socialism and his greatest fear fascism. In *The Road To Wigan Pier*, Orwell insists we need less class consciousness, expropriation, bourgeois ideology and proletarian solidarity, not to mention the trio of thesis, antithesis and synthesis and more about justice, liberty and the plight of the exploited and unemployed. At the heart is common decency. United against fascism, hopefully class prejudice will fade away.

His hope too was of a sinking of the middle classes into an amorphous mass of working class from teachers, journalists, jobless Cambridge graduate, clerks and civil servants, commercial travellers and thrice-bankrupt drapers. "All we have to lose is dropping our aitches." Orwell would have to wait until 1945 for a Labour government and the Beveridge report, addressing the "five giants" of idleness, ignorance, disease, squalor and want.

Concerning Orwell were attitudes, the inclinations and foibles of human nature and relentless march of mechanization, recurring themes in part 2 of *The Road to Wigan Pier.* Seedlings of *Animal Farm* and *1984* were in place in what Orwell foresaw as a distinctly restless world with the rise of totalitarian systems, whether fascist or communist, or other variants.

Discrimination and bias in education

In 1916 Sir John Gorst, Conservative Vice-President of the Committee on Education, stated that school boards had merely dabbled in education, damaging financially insecure grammar schools in the process. Balfour chimed in to say 'intolerable strain' had been placed on the voluntary sector that included denominational schools, but some felt that increased religious

teaching was detrimental. There was a belief also that further education of 'lower classes' would imperil social order. Taxing minds was the purpose in raising the school leaving age beyond 12. In Europe, many schools focused on engineering and science, practical subjects that were downplayed in the British model, "the one preferred by gentlemen."

A secondary school was to offer scholars, up to and beyond 16, a graded course of instruction "of wider scope and more advanced degree than that given in elementary schools." It was common for these schools to admit pupils, "considered of sufficient intellect" to benefit, from the ages of seven and eight. In 1917, a "school certificate' and 'higher school certificate' were introduced, forerunner of GCE O and A Levels and a pre-requisite for university entrance.

Many children continued to be educated in a 'senior section' of elementary schools until the age of 12, whilst some were taught at a higher-grade school that straddled elementary and secondary education. Three types of secondary school existed in post-war Britain: endowed grammar school, a county or municipal school under a local education authority and 'central schools,' developed in London and Manchester especially, and likewise under control of the LEA. Although having a less academic curriculum, they did not teach specific vocational skills as in a Trade School, such as at Shoreditch specialising in furniture and cabinet-making with a leaving age of 15 or 16.

At the outbreak of war all but six of over 1,000 grant-aided secondary schools charged fees. The intent was to extend an opportunity to all scholars deemed "to profit by the instruction they are given." By 1919 nearly 30% of children had free places, helped in part by the TUC and others saying the system was unfair, if not 'rotten,' and by pioneering initiatives with the Bradford Charter to the fore, insisting on secondary education for all to the age of 16.

Herbert Fisher, Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield University, was instrumental in pioneering the Act of 1918 bearing his name. In his biography, Fisher referred to a meeting with dockers in Bristol. "The prospect of wider opportunities which the new plan for education might open to the disinherited filled them with enthusiasm." He proposed raising the school leaving age to 14. The Act required LEAs to ensure elementary schools included practical instruction for 'older and more intelligent children,' and to co-operate with other LEAs to prepare children for further education, other than in elementary schools. Of great concern was not debarring the benefits of education through an inability to pay school fees. All children under 16 would be required to attend a continuation school for 320 hours a year.

The Act was well-intentioned, idealistic but unrealistic in application, falling victim also to the Geddes Axe of 1921 and the inability or unwillingness of LEAs to pool thinking and resources. LEAs were to maintain "a sufficient supply of continuation schools," a vague description with a vague aspiration. Raising the school leaving age was to come into operation on 1 January 1921 but just 25 days before, on 7 December 1920, the date was postponed and part-time education beyond 14 dropped. A further circular was issued on 11 January calling a halt to educational development as "the strictest economy must be exercised." Losers were working class children with the most to gain as R.H. Tawney, Manchester Guardian, WEA and labour organisations pointed out.

The Geddes Committee comprised entirely businessmen, "several of them personal friends of the prime minister." The committee proposed a 36% reduction in the Education budget that meant "eliminating children not able to benefit" from secondary education. Faced with huge criticism the government reduced spending by 13%. In 1922 Lloyd George resigned. Bonar Law, incoming Conservative prime minister, appointed Edward Wood as President of the

Board of Education. Severe cuts followed in the 1923 budget, including free places and free school meals. To save money there would be no new schools and untrained teachers were to be appointed to replace those leaving or retiring.

Baldwin took over as prime minister in May 1923, a year marked by a bitter NUT strike with schools closed in Southampton for about 14 weeks and nearly a year at Lowestoft. In 1920 there were almost six million children in public elementary schools with just 961 grant-aided secondary schools in England with 246,000 pupils. Of these, nearly 73,000 had free places, about 1.2% of all pupils in Britain.

A department committee proposed an eightfold increase in secondary school provision and for places to be free. Some employers felt it pointless in working class children staying "beyond an age at which a use could be found for them." R.H. Tawney suggested, not only a system of universal secondary education from 11 to 16, but for two stages in a continuous process; secondary education – education of the adolescent, and primary education to the age of 11 in preparation.

Between 1923 and 1933, Henry Hadow, also Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield University, penned six reports. His Committee felt there should be greater freedom in the curriculum, especially in girls' schools. Concerned about mental and physical fatigue, the first report felt girls should take the school certificate a year later than boys. Dr Cyril Northwood, Head of Harrow, held strong views, expounded when opening Westonbirt, a public school for girls. Their education "should be neither unduly academic, nor too closely modelled on that of boys." He could not see the point of preparation for university if the majority of girls intended to marry.

Under Labour, the leaving age was finally raised to 14 in October 1922 but funding remained an issue with class sizes up to 50. The proportion of free places in secondary schools was to rise to 40%. Enlightened authorities, like Leicester, had separate junior and senior schools. Bradford had nine secondary schools, providing a quarter of all places. Elementary schools often had senior departments which largely meant kicking one's heels until the appointed day of leaving. The Hadow Committee dug in their heels by insisting on primary and secondary education. Membership, which carried considerable clout, included Richard Tawney, Albert Mansbridge, founder of the WEA, Principal of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, Head of Roedean, a Liverpool headmistress and former NUT head, and the female Principal of Avery Hill Training College, London.

'Selection by differentiation' was to involve a written examination, supplemented by an oral one with psychological tests in borderline cases. Staffing of non-selective schools was to be on par with grammar schools and focus on practical work related to 'living interests.' Leaving at 15 was recommended. A further report argued for more money for books and the setting up of school libraries. In January 1925 the incoming Conservative Government dropped some proposals but retained separation at 11 years of age.

Further cuts were made to education budgets in the years to 1929. In his autobiography Lord Eustace Percy, President of the Board of Education, came to the conclusion that elementary education beyond 11 did not form part of a ladder, or preparation for anything. They were just "finishing schools for young workers." He said it is little wonder that a "class education of this kind was coming to be increasingly suspected and resented."

The Board of Education wanted as little change as possible. Selection would be retained. A reduction in secondary places was possible and pupils in central schools would not be entered for external examinations. The ceiling of 25% in selective places remained, whilst the 75%

majority languished in senior elementary schools whose courses led to no qualifications at all. Opposition to schooling beyond 14, and therefore qualifications, came from industry, insisting "only a minority were mentally capable of benefiting." A school medical officer felt secondary education pointless and superfluous because of "the shallowness" of pupil intellect.

Free places in grammar schools doubled between 1920 and 1932 to almost 50%, on the basis the brightest were worth spending money on. The catch was scholarship entry depended on "the quality of the social and economic environment as London, Bradford, Liverpool and the countryside" testified. The poorer the district, the lower the success rate. In 1934 the Labour controlled London County Council introduced an idea for 'multi-bias' schools that would rely on tests and streamed sets to determine aptitude and ability.

Nationally, "more than 80% of children left school at 14 to take up dead-end jobs which ended in unemployment queues," as illustrated in the cotton industry around Nelson, Colne and Oldham. Only one child in ten in an elementary school received a formal secondary education at 11, compared to Germany with twice as many, with France slightly more, three times in Switzerland and almost all pupils in the USA.

Parents with resolve, determination, unstinting support and high expectations of their children could succeed – with considerable effort. Kathy of Enfield illustrates. Her father had been a sailor and now worked for the post office whilst her mother stayed at home, bringing up the family of three. They applied for a scholarship to the grammar school which meant Kathy taking two examinations, spaced well apart. Kathy was accepted as was an older brother.

She studied hard at school and at home too. An end of term report spoke fairly well of her academic abilities but not sport, especially swimming. She was placed about half-way in her class. Don't worry about swimming said her father. If your boat goes down, you will soon be picked up. Those who can swim will be left and may well drown. This proved to be so as en route to Canada as an evacuated child her ship was torpedoed.

"I expect you to be in the top six, not half-way," insisted father. Kathy excelled and often said home life and school were such a happy part of her life. Discipline was firm but fair. Kathy was expected to help with household chores from cooking and cleaning to ironing numerous shirts. "We all chipped in and did our bit." Kathy learned to play a small piano thanks to a gift. She had a natural talent and soon her parents bought a full-size piano via a post office loan, payable in instalments. Exams followed. In later life Kathy was a church organist, keen on improvisation to liven up rather tuneless hymns and tedious sermons.

The Spens Committee in 1938 proposed three types of secondary school: grammar for the academically able, "likely to proceed to university," technical schools for those with practical ability and 'new' modern secondary schools for the rest. The emphasis was on the predictive power of intelligence tests championed by Cyril Burt. Grammar schools would comprise 15%. Sir Fred Clarke, Director of the London Institute, warned a barely intelligible system would lead to social conflict whilst the TUC were concerned "at the perpetuation of children into industrial and social strata." The intervention of war put the proposals on hold. Like several other bodies, Spens proposed leaving at 16, finally achieved in 1973 – 35 years late!

Almost all presidents of the Board of Education during the inter-war years were members of the landed gentry or aristocracy; all Eton educated and all but one at Oxford. At best, they had only a nodding acquaintance with the schools system and needs. The education of their political masters and administrators was firmly within the independent sector. Professor of

Education at Leicester University and historian, Brian Simon, is not alone in expressing little surprise that the prevailing social pattern of education would be upheld and perpetuated.

In 1938 just over half of children over the age of 11 remained in all-age elementary schools, untouched by developments in the inter-war years. Meanwhile, public schools had hardly changed too, other than addition of Stowe and Canford in 1923, for boys only, and Westonbirt in 1928 for girls. In the late 1930s, only 24% of entrants to Oxford and 19% to Cambridge, came from the state sector and 54.9% for all universities.

Put another way, 76% of all Oxford entrants and 81% of Cambridge, came from just 1.1% of the entire pupil population. This manifested in working life with a lopsided balance in training for positions of responsibility, limited interview opportunities and few prospects of attaining key leadership roles in government, state institutions, business & commerce and the military.

Demise of the country house

During World War 1 some stately homes were turned into military hospitals and convalescent homes, with family members dutifully stepping forward to treat injured men evacuated from the front. *Country House Society* by Dr Pamela Horn tells how the riding school and indoor tennis courts at Woburn Abbey were converted into a 100-bed hospital, with the home's gardeners, domestic servants and chauffeurs taking on the duties of orderlies and stretcher bearers. The slaughter carried off many an aristocratic son and heir. It severely depleted the number of house staff and agricultural workers too, upon which the great estates relied.

Far from secure, the outwardly rock-solid world of country houses that *Country Life* recorded - the world of substantial houses on landed estates, the world of Gosford Park, teeming with its servants and subservient tenants - was under intense threat. Social, political and economic forces were eating away at the foundations of country-house life. The rise of democracy with county councils and a reformed Parliament, culminating in the emasculation of the House of Lords in 1910-11, brought an end to landowners' political power. With it went the political significance of the country house.

Estates were left groping for a purpose. Despite high running costs, and inconvenience of location, country houses had brought power, prestige and influence. Until about 1900, anyone who wanted a part in running the nation lived in a country house. No longer. Great Victorian houses, such as Clumber Park in Nottinghamshire, built for entertaining on a massive scale, were particularly vulnerable. Clumber, abandoned by the seventh Duke of Newcastle for the suburban comforts of Forest Farm near Windsor in 1908, was finally demolished in 1938.

In May 1918, George Herbert realised he had little choice but to sell much of the furniture at his impressive home in Bretby, Derbyshire. In similar vein, a few years later Maud Alice Burke took the equally painful, if slightly less desperate measure, of selling her jewels and replacing them with costume pieces.

George was not an unemployed miner, or factory worker facing destitution; nor was Maud an impoverished middle-class widow. They were Lord Carnarvon and Lady Cunard, members of Britain's titled aristocracy. For generations they had enjoyed untold wealth, thanks to the country's economic strength and fruits of the largest empire in history. Their own severely reduced circumstances reflected those of many upper class families in the years that followed World War 1. Several contemporaries were forced to sell not just their treasured belongings to make ends meet, but their stately homes – passed down to them through generations.

In 1918 Sir Francis Ashley-Corbett sold his entire 4,500-acre Everleigh Manor house and estate, in Wiltshire. The previous year Lord Pembroke had sold one of his estates in the same county, and went on to dispose of 8,400 acres of the Wilton estate, also in Wiltshire, with many of his tenant farmers taking the opportunity to buy their holdings.

Many who had accumulated several country estates through marriage sold those surplus to requirement. The Duke of Northumberland owned five. Stanwick Park in Yorkshire, put on the market in 1921, was demolished two years later. With rents falling, many landowners with large mortgages found interest payments hard to meet, while a collapse in land prices meant the cost of a mortgage threatened to exceed the value of their estates. On top came higher income tax and death duties, not onerous, but draining in combination with falling incomes and collapsing landowner morale. This was not helped by encroaching towns and cities that threatened the once idyllic setting of many houses.

All this led to massive land sales after 1918 and a sharp rise in country house demolitions. Seventeen houses are known to have been lost in 1926 alone; not that all those selling up were forced to do so by dire necessity. Some were pragmatically restructuring their assets. Others followed the lead of the Duke of Leeds. He had inherited in excess of half a million pounds after tax and decided living in idle comfort on the Riviera was much preferred, rather than face his responsibilities as a landowner. He sold Hornby Castle, that dated back to the Middle Ages. It was demolished later that year.

The Wall Street Crash of 1929 had a massive adverse impact on members of the aristocracy who had invested heavily in the stock market, hoping to maintain their privileged lifestyle. Sir Arthur & Lady Sybil Colefax lost their life savings. She used her privileged status to reinvent herself as a fashionable interior designer in partnership with Peggy Ward, Countess Munster, unlike wealthy heiress Mabelle Wichfeld. She had once employed a retinue of 80 servants at Blair Castle in Perthshire. On her death in 1933 there was insufficient cash to pay the funeral costs at Savoy Chapel, next to the Savoy Hotel. Friends stepped in to settle payment.

For the wealthy and eccentric, life was still marvellous. At his country house near Newmarket, Lord Fairhaven had an extra touch of luxury for guests. When their shoes were taken away overnight by servants to be cleaned and polished, they were returned with the laces ironed. Such excess was de rigeur at opulent Anglesey Abbey. Every afternoon a chauffeur-driver limousine from his lordship's extensive fleet of Rolls Royces was dispatched the six miles into Cambridge for his valet to collect an evening paper. At night, Fairhaven listened to the BBC news on a wireless set standing on a silver salver.

Between the wars is generally seen as a period of gentle and genteel decline for a thousand or so of our stately homes, in which shadows lengthened on the lawns, estates were broken up, their oaks felled and parks given over to suburban sprawl. But some proved to have life in them yet. New money – of which the Fairhavens were but one example – poured in, and Britain's country houses were to have a final heyday, if not fling.

Times seemed harder for the likes of Thomas 5th Marquess of Bath. He lost his eldest son and his brother on the Western Front and was forced to sell off 8,600 acres of the Longleat estate over the next three years to raise money. Decline is hardly the word for the lifestyle he led. In keeping an indoor staff of more than 20, footmen still wore silk stockings, patent leather hats, pumps and cockade hats. When his surviving son, Henry, came of age in 1926, the year of the General Strike, no fewer than 1,000 guests sat down to lunch at Longleat

Nor did much change at Lowther Castle in Westmoreland where every morning the Earl of Lonsdale, a keen racing man, had his grooms lay out a stencil of the family coat of arms with numbered sections on the stable floor. Into each portion they sprinkled different coloured sawdust. When the stencil was complete there lay the Lonsdale coat of arms in full colour. Each morning the Earl would come to inspect it, bringing with him his pack of pet dogs. Soon they scrabbled around in the sand, and much worse, ruining their grooms' hard work.

Similar disregard for others' efforts was shown at Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire, where 50 servants kept 80 open wood fires burning in the rooms because the crusty, old-fashioned Duke of Bedford refused to install central heating. He clung to tradition. Dinner guests were assigned a personal footman who stood behind their chair whilst they ate. When electricity was eventually installed at Woburn, each bedroom was still equipped with a single candle so house guests could seal their letters with wax.

Other country houses of the era were more modern and daring. At Faringdon, the eccentric Lord Berners dyed the pigeons a different colour every month and suggested his neighbouring farmers might do the same to their horses and cattle. His guests included the surrealist artist Salvador Dali who played the piano in the ornamental lake, whilst poet John Betjeman's wife, Penelope, brought her horse to tea in the drawing room.

Another guest was the Marchesa Luisa Casati. She kept a pair of pet cheetahs at her palazzo by the Grand Canal in Venice and allegedly dipped her black servants in gold paint. When she stayed at Faringdon she brought a boa constrictor in a glass case. "Would it like something to eat?" Berner's mother asked. "No" the Marchesa replied. "It had a goat this morning."

Legendary too were the parties that society photographer Cecil Beaton held at Ashcombe, his house on the Wilshire Downs. At weekends he indulged what he called his "queer streak." At a time when homosexuality was illegal, there were many masks, dressing up and play-acting by Beaton and his gay friends. Ashcombe was something new, a place in the country rather than a fully-fledged country house. Beaton would drive down from London on Fridays and the guests would arrive the next day. Their way to the house was lined by papier mache figures pointing them in the right direction. Then the fun began.

Meanwhile at Madresfield Court in Worcestershire, Earl Beauchamp had a passion for male servants which he indulged with reckless abandon. Diarist Harold Nicholson remembered a dinner where an astonished fellow guest turned to him and asked, "Did I hear Beauchamp whisper to the butler, "Je t'adore"?" Quick as a flash, Nicholson, whose homosexual affairs were pursued rather more discretely shook his head, insisting he said, "shut the door."

At other country houses, more traditional pastimes held sway, such as at Chatsworth where the 9th Duke of Devonshire was uncertain with a shotgun. He proudly showed friends a gate on the estate where he made a record bag with a single shot. A wounded cock pheasant was running past the gate and he fired at the bird, killing it. With the same shot, he also killed a retriever that was pursuing the bird, wounded the dog's owner in the leg and hit his own chef, who happened to be on the other side of the gate, watching the action.

Viscount Castlerosse could be similarly hit-and-miss with his sporting passion, golf especially, as he insisted on being accompanied on a round by a servant carrying a jug of whisky. The Viscount helped himself to a tumbler at each tee. Castlerosse built his own full-size course at the family seat, Kenmare House, in County Kerry. Here he set up a series of locked huts at strategic points around the course, each containing a bottle of whisky, doing away with the need for a servant carrying a jug.

During one competition he buried the ball in a bunker. As a swelling crowd gathered to see how he would extricate it, he cried to the skies, "Oh God, come down and help me with this shot. And don't send Jesus. This is no job for a boy."

The Astors wealth was largely unconnected with land and so, impervious to the agricultural depression of the Twenties, they were able to hold court in a style unaffected by vicissitudes and fluctuations of the market. When full at weekends, their Cliveden house accommodated up to 40 people. Charlie Chaplin was a regular guest and so was Lawrence of Arabia.

On one occasion, Lawrence and Nancy Astor, the American-born socialite and MP who had married Waldorf, the 2nd Viscount Astor, suddenly leapt up from the drawing-room and ran outside where they jumped on Lawrence's motorbike and roared off. A few minutes later they skidding back to a halt. "We did 100 miles an hour," shrieked Nancy.

At this spacious Italianate mansion overlooking the Thames, a staff of Victorian proportions was maintained throughout the Twenties and Thirties. There was a butler, an under-butler and three footmen; a valet for Viscount Astor and two lady's maids for his wife and daughter; a housekeeper; four housemaids; and two still-room maids, whose work was to help produce drinks and medicines, and to preserve herbs and flowers for use in flavouring food.

There were also two women who came in daily but lived out; a chef; three kitchen maids; a scullery maid; another daily; four laundry maids; two odd-job men; a hall boy; a telephonist; a house carpenter and a night watchman. And that was just the indoor staff as there were another 70 odd estate workers, from gardeners and game-keepers to electricians, a boatman and even a part-time clock-winder.

Presiding over all staff was the Astors' formidable butler, Edwin Lee, who joined as a footman in 1912 and worked his way up. He was always immaculately attired in a black alpaca jacket and bow tie during the day, and navy blue tailcoat and black knee breeches in the evening. Some people thought he was Lord Astor himself, recalled one his colleagues. "He acted like it." He was a hard task-master too.

There was a high turnover of staff at Cliveden. In the interwar years it was quite usual for servants to move on, either to marry or find a better position but there was another reason. Nancy Astor was a demanding employer, sometimes both mean and mean-spirited. Rose Harrison, her personal maid, recalled her mistress as capricious, peremptory and occasionally violent. During one tantrum she tried to kick Rose. "Whenever I am hurtful I mean it." She told her on another occasion, "and I enjoy it."

The secret, Rose discovered, was stand up to her. After one spat, Nancy stated grandly the difference between them was "that I was born to command." Rose replied, "The difference between us, my lady, is that you have money, and money is power." It was well said. By the end of the Thirties, even big prestigious country houses such as Cliveden, were starting to feel the winds of social change. Young generations of servants were less prepared to accept the terms and conditions of employment and whims their elders had taken for granted.

Many families also found they could no longer afford a vast number of staff. Indeed, when war broke out in 1939, smart owners were quick to offer up their mansions they could no longer upkeep, in exchange for the war effort. There was a feeling that doing so voluntarily, and as a result being able to choose one's own tenant, gave a degree of control: better to offer a house to an evacuated girls' boarding school than for your house to be requisitioned by the military as an army camp or a gunnery training school.

How right they were. In the decade after 1945, hundreds of country houses were demolished as a result of wartime mistreatment. Classical garden statues were smashed by servicemen who couldn't care less. Rococo panelling was defaced and Baroque staircases broken up for firewood. Concrete pillboxes sprang up on what were once immaculate lawns and elaborate gardens vanished under a wilderness of weeds.

When the Ministry of Defence began to hand back these requisitioned mansions it was clear that leaking pipes, sagging roofs and dry rot, wanton damage and destruction, and derelict gardens, had all taken their toll. Many owners never reoccupied their ancestral homes. The country houses of Britain had their swansong between the wars. Now there was only silence in some once famous country houses and estates that now had a look of abandonment.