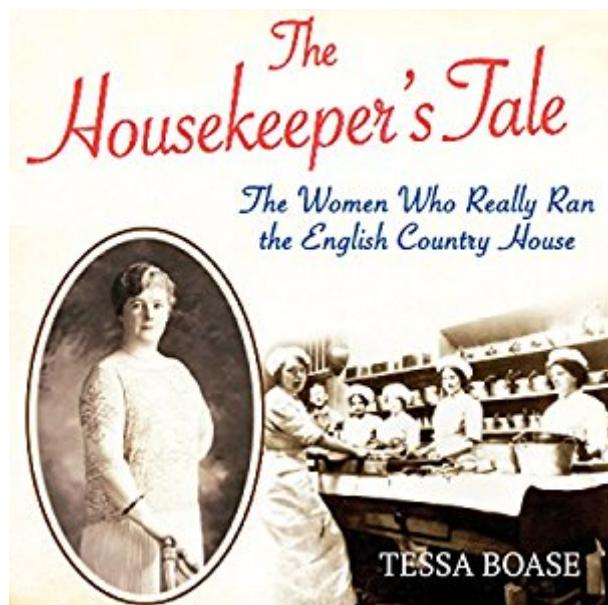


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# The Housekeeper's Tale: The Women Who Really Ran The English Country House



## **Synopsis**

Working as a housekeeper was one of the most prestigious jobs a 19th and early 20th century woman could want - and also one of the toughest. A far cry from the Downton Abbey fiction, the real life Mrs. Hughes was up against capricious mistresses, low pay, no job security, and grueling physical labor. Until now, her story has never been told. The Housekeeper's Tale reveals the personal sacrifices, bitter disputes and driving ambition that shaped these women's careers. Using secret diaries, unpublished letters, and the neglected service archives of our stately homes, Tessa Boase tells the extraordinary stories of five working women who ran some of Britain's most prominent households. Dorothy Doar was Regency housekeeper for the obscenely wealthy first Duke and Duchess of Sutherland at Trentham Hall, Staffordshire. Sarah Wells, a deaf and elderly Victorian (mother to H.G. Wells), was in charge of Uppark, West Sussex. Ellen Penketh was Edwardian cook-housekeeper at the impecunious Erddig Hall in the Welsh borders. Hannah Mackenzie ran Wrest Park in Bedfordshire, Britain's first country-house war hospital. Grace Higgens was cook-housekeeper to the Bloomsbury set at Charleston farmhouse in East Sussex for half a century. Revelatory, gripping and unexpectedly poignant, The Housekeeper's Tale champions the invisible women behind the English country house.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Modern day existence of antiques - ceramics, textiles and furniture is directly attributable not to days-gone-by owners but to those women of sterling qualities and boundless energy;

housekeepers, who worked long hours to preserve the beauty and as near as humanly possible, perfect condition of the objets d'art in their care while running large country houses. Tessa Boase, tells the stories of five British housekeepers who through their labour and devotion to duty made it possible for their employers to live a lifestyle most of us can only dream about. The factual accounts of these extraordinary women's experiences - mostly miserable working conditions with upper class penny pinching employers, spans the 19th century, two world wars, ending in the present time with the examination of the duties of a housekeeper employed by an English aristocratic family, who, to survive financially, open their home and surrounding estate to day trippers and tourists. A housekeeper's lot may not have been an easy or happy one but in the nineteenth and early twentieth century it was relatively well-paid and with live-in accommodation, a sought after career path for single working women and middle-class widows. Researching secret diaries, unpublished letters and documenting excerpts from the service archives of British stately homes, Tessa Boase has written *The Housekeeper's Tale* in an intimate day-in-the-life of style which empathises with each woman's daily grind of duties and provides a vivid commentary on the social niceties and customs of the day.

I found this book captivating from the start and could hardly put it down. The author drew me into the housekeeper/servant world with her compelling writing style, believable scenarios, and thorough research stemming from mostly primary sources, but also contemporary newspaper accounts and advertisements, etiquette books for servants, etc. As she introduced each of the five housekeepers, I could almost envision their quarters in the dark, damp lower levels of the gracious homes they managed and feel the miserable cold the support staff must endure as they dropped into bed in the unheated attic. While deeply appreciating the housekeeper position of stature and security, I felt panicky to imagine the burden and vulnerability of unrealistic expectations piled on each housekeeper, particularly those who must also take on the responsibility of cook. Preparing a sumptuous, unique, and gracious meal for dozens of - or some 100 - guests nightly or every few days, plus manage the female servants, order supplies, handle large sums of money to personally pay vendors, manage accounts, see to all the linens, candles, dinnerware, the preserves, the bread-baking, wine-making, and a myriad of other responsibilities are all beyond my comprehension how one person could be expected to accomplish these many time-demanding tasks. The author's study of diaries, letters, household accounts and archives, portraits, court cases, memoirs, biographies, etc. bring the aristocratic family into focus, particularly the mistress. Not many high born families exhibited the decency towards their servants, condescending though it was, of those

depicted in Masterpiece Theatre's "Downton Abbey".

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