

Wargrave Local History Society

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The History of Housework

Laureen Williamson began by explaining that the history of housework is really the history of mankind - not just that of a 'housewife'. About 10,000 years ago, humans were hunters and gatherers, with crude brushwood hovels for living accommodation. They managed little beyond living 'day to day'.

When farming was developed, animals were herded on the farm, and seeds sown for crops to suit, so that individuals no longer had to go out and search for food. This was a revolution - making it easier for individuals, who could also produce more food than required for everyday needs. The need then arose for the 'housewife'. There would be sufficient food produced in the summer that some could be stored for use in the winter, or bartered with artisans for tools etc. In many ways, life has not changed a lot since, in that the housewife has to find ways to preserve food during the summer to use in the winter - although there are now more modern ways to achieve this - but it was almost exclusively the right of the women to prepare the food - smoking the hams, pickling the eggs and so on.

As people began to live in 'proper' houses, the management of the house itself became important. There were many chores to be done - many we would not recognise today. It had been normal to eat food as it was found - raw, and not cooked. Keeping a source of heat was a problem - and once a fire was lit they never wanted it to go out - as re-igniting it was very difficult. In time, the housewife found ways to enhance the flavour of the food with spices and herbs, and learnt how to smoke fish to preserve it etc. Other ways to preserve food, such as with salt or by 'drying' also were found effective.

The 1600s - 1800s was a wealthy period in English history and, although people were often poor, they were very well off compared to previous times. The more wealthy people got, the more facilities they needed to provide for the family. The first 'gadget' available was the servant and these had incredibly hard work to do. Even 12 year olds would work from 6am to midnight. Pre 1600, heating was by wood, but coal from Newcastle became the preferred fuel - being considered clean and easy by comparison. However, the fire grates were made of iron, and so liable to rust, so they - and the fire irons and fire backs too - had to be black leaded daily (a nasty mucky task). Another chore was to make the candles - the main source of lighting. Beeswax cones were expensive and rare, so most were made from tallow - by collecting mutton dripping from the cooking, drying it and adding a wick. When oil lamps became available, the task was easier - but the smoke made everything black, so the chore of 'spring cleaning' to remove the smell and stains became necessary.

This also accentuated the need to wash clothes. Until the 1700s or so, ordinary people had so few clothes, they never washed them, and probably wore all their clothes at once through the winter. As everyone was of a similar standard, they did not notice the smell, although some gentlemen wore nose-gays - to mask their own odour as well as that of others. The way to wash clothes was to take them to a stream, and beat them, and then hang out to dry. The wealthy people did have more clothes - and servants to do the washing for them. It was soon realised that hot water helped to remove the dirt - but the only way to get such was to boil a container on the open fire. Again, hard work for the housewife or servant. Soap helped get ingrained dirt from the heavy fabrics used at the time, but a mechanical action - originally just the hands - was still needed. Ammonia helped the action, and there was a whole trade collecting urine from back yards to be shared out on wash day. The stench was so strong that people might faint, but it was considered part of 'life'. The early aids for the 'washer woman' were to help the mechanical action that released the dirt - a washboard being advertised as 'equal to the best washer woman's knuckles'. Until 30 years or so ago, it was commonplace to boil the washing - the movement of the boiling water being more important than its temperature. The clothes would then have to be rinsed and dried - either by hand or with

the aid of a mangle. As the mechanism of the latter had to be oiled, there was a risk that freshly cleaned clothes would get oil stains on them!

Another aspect of housework was the cleaning of carpets, which can hold ten times their own weight in dirt. They used to be not only laid on the floor, but also hung on the walls for insulation. In the days of the gas or oil lamps, the task of cleaning them was formidable, and were swept by hand - with a lot of the dirt literally 'swept under the carpet'. In late Victorian times, an early vacuum cleaning service became available. The Mechanism was brought by horse and cart to the house, and whilst parked in the street, long hoses would reach to an upstairs window. A clear section of hose allowed the housewife to see the dirt being removed! Such a large vehicle parked in the street also attracted a lot of attention - and the equivalent of sundry parking tickets!

Food preservation was aided by the invention of the refrigerator. Previously, ice was collected in winter, wrapped in cloth, and buried in the ground, where it would stay frozen to keep food cool. The big country houses adapted the idea, having well insulated ice houses, densely packed with ice used to preserve the food, and also provide ice for use in drinks.

Of course, now a days, electricity has changed the nature of housework dramatically. Not only can it power the 'labour saving' devices, like the washing machine, vacuum cleaner etc, but also the use of electric lighting and heating means the levels of dirt associated with open fires, candles and oil lamps are a thing of the past.
