



Blackwork Journey Blog

August 2011

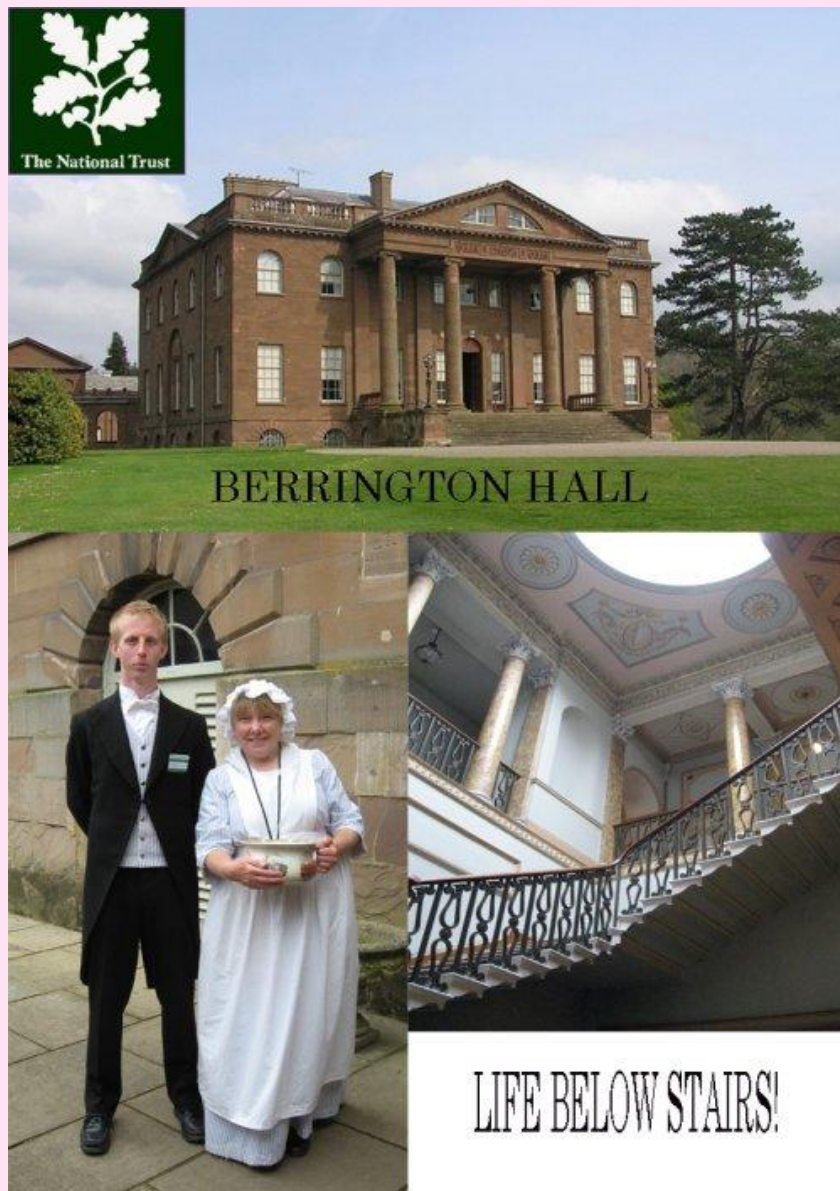
Laundry Life!



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The National Trust in the United Kingdom works to preserve and protect the coastline, countryside and buildings of England, Wales and Northern Ireland through practical caring and conservation, through learning and discovery and through encouraging millions of people to visit and enjoy their national heritage.

After a recent visit to Berrington Hall, a stately home built in 1778 - 1781 which is set in the Herefordshire countryside, I realised just how much I take for granted and how different my life would have been even 100 years ago! Berrington Hall reveals the lives of its wealthy owners as well as the lives of its servants, something I found particularly interesting.



Footman and chambermaid at Berrington Hall

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Because so much of my time is spent in caring for textiles, turning on the washing machine, using a steam iron and occasionally a dryer, I was fascinated by the Victorian laundry which was located just outside the main building. Ruled over with a rod of iron by the chief launderess, the three servants, one a child of twelve, would toil every day of the week with the most basic of equipment to maintain the household's linen. The laundry was soaked in lye which was a mixture of ashes and urine which helped to remove stains and retain a white colour.

"Before that you suffer it to be washed, lay it all night in urine, the next day rub all the spots in the urine as if you were washing in water; then lay it in more urine another night and then rub it again, and so do till you find they be quite out."

Hannah Woolley, The Compleat Servant-Maid, 1677

Whilst herbs were added to sweeten the mixture, it stripped the skin from the servants' fingers and hands which often became raw and callused. Soap was made from ash lye and animal fat pressed into a hard brown block. Sunlight soap was a much later addition!



Wooden sink, washboards, herbs and soap were used along with the "modern" boiler and the oven for heating the flat irons

After soaking in a large wooden tub, the linen would be moved to three large wooden sinks, (wood held the heat!) where the servants would use metal washboards to rub the fabric. There were three taps - one for hot water, one for cold water and one for soft water! The invention of a "modern" boiler made life much easier, since boiling water was readily available for use with the dolly tub and peggy. The legs on the peggy were used to stir and pound the washing

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in the dolly tub which was very hard on the fabric! I remember my mother having one before she bought a washing machine in the *1950's*.



Irons, dolly tubs, drying oven and open oven for heating flat irons in the laundry.

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Once the washing had been completed, the linen was passed through the mangle several times to remove the excess water. The mangle consisted of a heavy pair of wooden rollers well known for catching unwary fingers. It was also used after the linen had been dried for pressing and smoothing to remove the creases from sheets and table linen.



*The dreaded mangle and Sunlight Soap!
From the mangle and the dryer the laundry moved to the ironing.
A polishing iron is being used for the collars. Starch was also used to great effect.*

The linen was then placed onto the drying racks which were heated by a boiler and once dry, the arduous process of ironing with heavy flat irons began. One iron was in use whilst the other was being heated in the open oven. The heaviest iron was used for coats and a special iron was used for crimping. Irons had to be kept clean, sand-papered and polished. Beeswax was used to prevent the irons from sticking to the starched items. The atmosphere must have always been very damp and unpleasant. Opening the vents in the boiler for the dryer was a particularly dangerous task as if the vents were not opened correctly when the dryer was opened, the laundress would be met by a wall of scalding steam.



"There are various things which different people mix with their starch, such as alum, gum arabic, and tallow, but if you do put anything in, let it be a little isinglass, for that is by far the best. About an ounce to a quarter of a pound of starch will be sufficient."

The complete servant maid: or young woman's best companion. Containing full, plain and easy directions...,
Anne Barker, c1770

The whole process of collecting the household linen, cataloguing it, soaking, washing, drying and ironing took most of the week. For example, on Sunday the household linen was checked and sent back to the main house and the laundry was scrubbed down ready to begin the whole process once again.

So when I complain about the pile of washing or the ironing waiting to be done I will think about those women who worked so hard to achieve what I do in a few hours with minimum effort in a warm, dry kitchen with biological washing powder, an effective washing machine and spray starch just to give the right amount of stiffness!

I hope you have enjoyed an insight into a world long forgotten. Embroidery still has to be prepared carefully for mounting, kept clean, ironed and if necessary, starched. So spare a thought for the laundress of yesteryear at her work, trying to achieve what we do today so easily!

Happy ironing!

Liz

