

The Basement



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The basement was a hidden world where work was carried out by a team of servants to support the lavish lifestyles of their masters upstairs.

What happened in this area?

The main focus of the basement was of course the kitchen. A steady stream of servants would be seen busily dashing to and from the upstairs rooms carrying dishes of food, coals for the many fires, water for washing and tea-making, bottles of wine for the gentlemen, not to mention the chamber pot from the bedrooms and dining room!



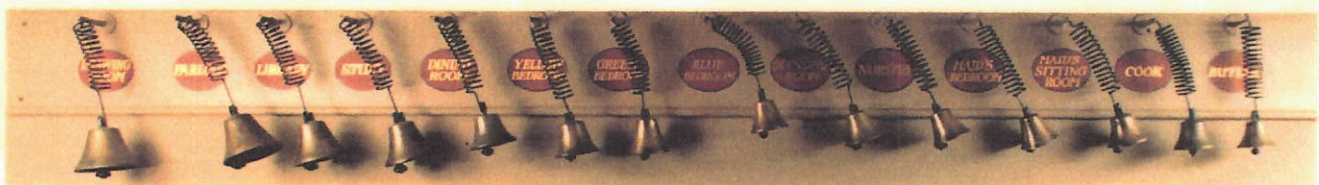
Cook and kitchenmaid preparing dinner in the kitchen (still from Georgian House film)

The corridor is lined with doors leading to other useful rooms such as the wine cellar, the china closet, the pantry and the linen store. The gift shop may have served as a servants' hall, as it features a small fireplace.

At the front of the house, steps lead down to the basement and coal cellars. The door at this level is the 'tradesman's entrance', intended for deliveries and the comings and goings of the servants, who would not have been allowed to use the main front door.

How did the bell board work?

Each bell is connected by a system of wires within the walls to the brass handles seen on each side of the grand fireplaces upstairs. When a handle was turned, a bell would ring and shake on its spring to indicate to the servants which room required attention. Each bell is a different size to create a series of tones, which the servants would quickly come to recognise. The spiral springs are a Scottish feature. In England the bells were usually suspended upon metal springs shaped like a question mark.



What was the china closet for and why was it locked?

This room (on your left as you walk from the kitchen to the servant's room) was a storage area for the family's finest tableware and silver and would have been kept locked. Only the housekeeper would hold a key to this room, and it was one of her duties to monitor items within the cupboard to guard against theft.



What sort of items would have been kept here?

The present contents of this room have been chosen to reflect those detailed in an inventory from 1826 relating to No 1 Heriot Row, another New Town house. On display are further pieces of the Wedgwood dinner service seen on the dining table upstairs. This transfer-printed design is called 'Absalom's Pillar', and shows an ancient tomb in Jerusalem. This may seem an odd choice for a dinner service, but the design would have seemed exotic and glamorous to Georgian eyes.



The huge wooden chest would have been used for the storage and transportation of silver and has compartments for a vast array of silver plate items. The two Derby chamber pots feature both the rose of England and the thistle of Scotland, and date from 1780. The elaborate cruet set was made in 1803 by the famous Regency London silversmith, Paul Storr. The horn beakers have silver mounts and engraved panels, transforming humble objects into fashionable drinking vessels.

Above top: The china closet with its fine display of a Wedgwood dinner service

Above: The wine cellar: butler preparing the wine (still from Georgian House film)

Who controlled the wine cellar?

The butler held the keys to this room, with its beer barrels, measures and the labelled brick bins for different types of wines. Each night he would choose the vintage for dinner and monitor stocks within the cellar. During this period most levels of society drank beer, and the servants would have a daily allocation of ale as part of their salary.

Did the servants live down here?

Most servants would have lived in the tenements of the Old Town, or the mews lodgings of the New Town. Some may have lived in the Georgian House, in small bedrooms in the basement. Lower servants would have shared a room, but more senior staff, like the cook and butler, usually had their own bedrooms and even sitting rooms. They were important enough to have their own service bells to ring for the attention of the lower servants. We have recreated a servant's room at the far end of the corridor.