

Convict Womens Seminar May 2012

Talk – Gemma Webberley

I rise at dawn – a day in the working life of a servant girl in a colonial homestead.

Slide 1

I rise at dawn because early rising is indispensable if a servant would do her duty there are fires to be lit, breakfast got ready and lots of incidental jobs done in the hours before breakfast time. I work in the Pitcairns' house a very well run establishment in New Town - it isn't a large household and there is a cook, nursemaid, married couple who work in the house, a house servant, gardener, stable boy and myself. I'm both the scullery maid and help in the house.

I rise about 5.30 pull back my bedcovers to air and open the window when its not raining, its cold in winter so I wash using the jug and basin in my room and dress quickly to keep warm. My room is in the cottage across the courtyard, its small but it does have a fireplace and its warmed by the winter sun I share it with another maid so I have to be quiet when I rise. That s my window it has wire over it to stop the cats getting in during the day.

(There are two bedrooms in the cottage, another single room cottage in the courtyard, a loft for the stable boy in the stable and room for a married couple in the wooden barn.)

Slide 2

As I'm the first to rise in the household I have to set the kitchen range and get the fire going for the cook, she likes it to be up to the right temperature for cooking when she comes in to prepare the breakfast. We keep the firewood in the courtyard and I have to keep the baskets full in the kitchen and scullery. I don't know how she knows the right temperature but I set a roaring fire which dies down by the time she comes in. In the scullery I light the fire and put the big kettles over it to heat water. The water I fetch from the well in the late afternoon so that I don't have to traipse through the long grass in the early morning light. During the day I keep filling the water filter and emptying the bucket underneath I do this every time I pass the filter so that there is always plenty of water available for cooking and drinking.

Slide 3

I go through into the big house and get the fire going in the breakfast room it has to be nice and warm by the time the family rises after this I set and light the fire in the family morning room. I can go into this room across the courtyard so I don't disturb the family who are still sleeping. It's a pretty room painted with palm trees from the floor to the ceiling and gets lots of morning sun but it still needs a fire in winter. I have to tidy this room whilst I'm there so that's ready for the family to use after breakfast. I sweep the hearth and dust the furniture. I use a feather duster for the frames and chair covers and a cloth duster for the furniture. I have to work quickly as there is more to do.

The cook is in the kitchen when I pass through preparing the breakfast but before I set the table for the family I have to clean the front hall and the front steps. I close the door to the bedrooms so as not to wake the family and sweep the oilcloth and floor in the hall and dust the furniture. The front verandah is next its sandstone so I only have to sweep it and the stairs, we only scrub it once a month and it's a hard job down on your hands and knees.

Slide 4

The table is prepared and set in the breakfast room and I lay a crumb cloth underneath the table it makes it easier to clean up and can be taken outside afterwards and shaken. The cook always checks that I've laid the table properly it has to be just so. I don't serve the breakfast another maid does this but I help the cook make the toast and set the butter in clear fresh water.

Slide 5

Whilst the family are having breakfast I go down to their bedrooms I have to go through the courtyard and up the small hallway so as not to be seen by the family and I open the windows and lay the bed clothes out to air. The feather mattresses are turned and plumped up on the beds, they feel so soft not like my straw one.

Slide 6

I have to empty the chamber pots there are four of them and its four trips down to the outside privy. We have two privy's down behind the stable building, one for the man servants and one for the female servants.

Slide 7

It gets quiet smelly down there and every few months the stable boy has to dig out the pit and bury the waste over in the paddock. I'm pleased I'm not the stable boy. I bring more water from the well to fill up the jugs in each bedroom and rinse the chamber pots before putting them back in. Its my job to clean the bidet as well.

The housemaid helps me now and we get the beds made and the rooms dusted the fireplaces are swept but won't be set and lit again till later in the day ready for the evening. That's when we light the fires and lay the bedclothes out and put stone hot water bottles in the beds to warm them.

When we get back to the kitchen the family has finished their breakfast and we can clear the table, it's not my job to carry the china I get the crumbs off the table and pick up the crumb cloth from the floor and take it outside to empty. I do get to wash the dishes in the stone sink in the scullery you have to be very careful not to chip the cups.

Slide 8

When all this is done its time for our breakfast. We sit in the kitchen at the pine table for our meal there is the cook, housemaids, scullery maid, groomsman and stable boy. We have lots of hot tea and toast and oats that have been slowly cooking whilst we did our work and there's honey as well. Cooks says we need a good hot breakfast so that we can work hard all day. Nothing is wasted even the scraps are given to the cats or taken down to the chicken house after breakfast. Cook says the cats are the most important members of the household as they catch any mice that come in from the fields. I think they are a bit lazy as they hang around the courtyard all day sunning themselves.

Slide 9

I like going to the chickens in summer but not so much in winter, the chicken coop is down near the stables, there's a high wooden fence to keep them from wandering around the garden but it gets very muddy and smelly. If you climb on the fence you can see right down to Cornelian Bay and you

can smell the gum trees. I can hear the chickens from my room they are so close and the rooster crows at dawn so I know its time to rise. The stable boy collects the eggs and brings them up to the big house I have to wash them and lay them in straw in the cellar.

After breakfast I clean the candlesticks and trim the lamps. Once a month we spend a day making candles and boil the lamp wicks in vinegar. I'm always busy it pays not to look idle or the cook and head maid will find things for you to do. Cook is always needing things to bought up from the cellar and its such a small winding staircase to go down and you have to take a candle to be able to see.

Slide 10

I have special jobs to do each day, Mrs. Pitcairn is very organized and likes the household to run smoothly. Monday is wash day and we all pitch in to help, the linen is changed on the beds, clothes collected and buttons and ribbons removed before washing. The copper is lit nice and early ready for the washing. We do this in the courtyard, water is bought from the well in big buckets by the stable boy and Jacob the gardener. We all have our own duties I keep the fire going under the copper we take it in turns using the dolly that's hard work. and help with putting the washing through the mangle and pegging the washing out on the drying lawn. Jacob brings in potatoes from the garden which are peeled and grated under water and left to make a thick paste which is used to starch the clothes. If there is lots of washing we have to lay some clothes over the bushes to dry I always put it over the lavender so that it smells nice. In summer the washing can come in early and be ironed on the kitchen table or a plank that is put between two chairs but in winter it doesn't always dry and we have to hang it under the verandah and around the kitchen. By the end of wash day the courtyard cobbles are very wet and slippery and you have to be careful where you tread.

Slide 11

Wednesday we clean the bedrooms on Thursdays the drawing room and Friday the dining rooms and plate, Saturday the hallways and kitchen. The stone floor in the kitchen is swept and scrubbed my hands are red and sore by the time we are finished. We sprinkle the carpets with damp tea leaves to lay the dust before brushing them. And in the evening we have to bring in

the bathtub and cart hot water down to the bedrooms for the family baths. You can't fill the buckets right up or else you spill them on the way so it takes lots of trips. And always there are chamber pots to empty, I sometimes dread the ring of the bell I never get to answer the front door or tend to the children in the nursery or the mistress in the drawing room but I always get to empty the chamber pots.

Slide 12

Sunday I have off, but I'm expected to go to church in the morning I like to do this early so that I have the rest of the day to myself. I walk with some of the other servants up to St. John's church it isn't very far we walk beside the Maypole creek and up the hill.

Slide 13

Once a month I get another day off when I can go into the town its takes almost an hour to walk and I like when I return and come up and over the hill into New Town its very pretty and smells much nicer than the town and when I walk up the drive to Cairn Lodge there are white picket fences and the smell of the gum trees.

Slide 14

My favourite part of the day is after all our work is done and we get to sit in front of the fire in the kitchen with a nice cup of tea. The mistress has given me some old cloth and I cut it into small pieces and I'm sewing it onto old sheets which have been darned so often they can't be used in the house anymore. I'm making a quilt for my bed to cover the old grey blanket I have and after I'm finished I'll make a rug with all the leftovers so that when I get out of bed in winter there is something warm under my feet.

Gemma Webberley
National Trust of Australia (Tasmania)
Runnymede
May 2012