

TESSA BOASE

## CURRENT LECTURE SUBJECTS 2026-27

### **1. *NEW: The Architecture of Optimism: Building Health and Happiness Between the Wars***

Lidos and libraries, concert halls and cottage estates: the inter-war era was a time of bold and urgent experiments in social engineering through architecture.

Against a backdrop of the Great Depression, 'moral uplift' and 'optimism' became the buzzwords of the day. What if civic architecture could change the lives of the people? How could the puny 'C3' Brits be transformed into an A1 nation? What could we learn from our European neighbours (including, whisper it, the Germans)?

This fascinating talk celebrates those who – all too briefly – dared to dream bigger and better. It brings vividly to life their battles and triumphs, from the lavish Bermondsey bath house to Manchester's Wythenshawe estate; from the lido built by Guildford's unemployed, to Bexhill's De La Warr Pavilion, designed by a German Jewish escapee. An uplifting new talk, with great resonance for today.

### **2. *Fashion, Fury and Feathers: Women's Fight for Change***

When Tessa Boase told the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) she wanted to write their early story, they refused to let her visit their archives. To a former investigative journalist, this was a challenge she could not resist . . .

This lecture shines a light on the intriguing story of women's love affair with plumage – and of the brave eco feminists who fought back on behalf of the birds. Moving from a polite Victorian tea party to an egret hunt in a Florida swamp; from a suffragette 'monster rally' to a milliner's dusty workshop, you'll be taken back in time to a world where every woman, of every class, wore a hat.

Shocking and surprising, entertaining and moving: this lecture will shift your world view.

### **3. *Secrets of an Edwardian Shopaholic***

An extraordinary personal collection of Edwardian couture clothing lies in the vaults of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, once worn by a debutante named Heather Firbank. When Heather's maid persuaded the museum to accept her former mistress's entire wardrobe, the V&A's Fashion and Textile department was born. So who was Heather – and what secrets do her clothes yield up? From the country house 'Saturday to Monday' party, to the risqué fashion shows of couturier Lucile, this is an intimate portrait of shopping, high society, seduction and ruin in the years leading up to the Great War.

Social history at its most personal, unguarded and revealing.

### **4. *The Fabulous World of London's Lost Department Stores***

London's sumptuous Victorian and Edwardian department stores changed the capital – and changed its women. Shoppers of every rank were lavishly wooed, seduced and often undone by the temptations laid out before them in these new 'cathedrals of desire'.

Starting on Oxford Street's 'golden mile', we'll set off on a cultural tour of the capital's big stores – from snooty Marshall & Snelgrove, to Pontings 'House of Value'; from Gamages' legendary toy department, to the live flamingos atop Derry & Toms; from Bodgers of Ilford, to Bon Marché of Brixton. How did it feel to enter a great store in the lavish Edwardian era? What was it like to serve? From shoppers to shop girls, publicity stunts to wow factor window dressing, this is a fascinating slice of social history, with wonderful period images.

## **5. Art Deco & The Department Store**

Bold publicity stunts, statement architecture, suave dining: the 1930s was a supreme era for London's great emporia. Starting on Piccadilly with Joseph Emberton's Moderne masterpiece, Simpsons, we'll explore the capital's department stores through an Art Deco lens – from Selfridges' fabulous elevators, whizzing us up to roof garden fashion shows, to the jaw-dropping interiors of D.H. Evans, ready in time for the 1937 Coronation, to the live flamingos atop Derry & Toms. Then off to the suburbs where superb Deco buildings were springing up in surprising locations: Shinnars of Sutton, Holdrons of Peckham, Bodgers of Ilford...

Where did the Art Deco movement spring from, and what did Britain add to the genre? Who were the personalities behind these facades? How did they woo their customers? And what future today for obsolete emporia? A rich slice of social history from a captivating era.

## **6. A Sack Full of Toys: The Department Store & The Invention of Christmas**

The first Christmas grotto with a live Santa opened its doors at J. R. Roberts of Stratford in 1888. Seventeen thousand children visited – and so started a British institution that grew more lavish and inventive each decade. Soon Santa was arriving by coach and four, by luxury motorcar – even by mountaineering ropes, as he scaled the building's exterior (Quin & Axtens, Brixton).

Seasonal razzle-dazzle was invented by the department store: from those gargantuan Victorian Toy Bazaars, to exotic circuses of the Thirties and mechanical window displays of the Fifties. There was furious competition, top secrecy, dramatic countdowns. Who were the overgrown children behind it all? What were the financial stakes? And how did Christmas drive innovation?

A seasonal lecture with plenty of surprises.

## **7. The Housekeeper's Tale: The Women Who Really Ran the English Country House**

The most senior of upper servants, the housekeeper carried a family's secrets with her to the grave. She ran the English country house, controlled its female servants and conserved its many treasures – and yet has not been remembered in history. Using old letters, secret diaries and neglected archives, I've resurrected a series of fascinating stories from 19th and 20th century domestic service. We'll be looking at the evolution of this key role, from the formalities of the Victorian era to the power shift of the 20th-century, hastened by two world wars. Mrs Wells of Uppark, Mrs Mackenzie of Wrest Park, and Mrs Higgins of Charleston were working at times of great social change. Each housekeeper responded very differently to the challenges she faced.

This lecture presents a wide sweep of history.

**OR** For a more detailed & nuanced focus on an era, a house & its housekeeper, choose from the following:

## **8. Uppark, Sussex: 'The Worst Housekeeper'**

Mrs Sarah Wells – mother to author H.G. Wells – kept a revelatory diary for the 14 years she toiled below stairs at Uppark. She was an elderly, anxious woman working in a notoriously old-fashioned household in the late 19th-century. But what grated most was that her mistress was born a mere dairy farmer's daughter...

### **9. *Wrest Park, Bedfordshire: 'The Country House Great War Hospital'***

Once an indulgent weekend chateau, Wrest Park transformed itself into the War Office's best country-house base hospital, patching up the bodies of some 2000 soldiers. But when housekeeper Hannah Mackenzie crossed swords with Matron Miss Martin, the resulting bitter blood feud undermined the smooth running of the great house – with explosive results.

### **10. *Erddig, North Wales: 'The thief-cook'***

Erddig was one of those gentry households that threw nothing away – with one telling exception. For the Edwardian cook-housekeeper Ellen Penketh, who allegedly stole £500 from the extravagant Yorke family, there is today a gaping hole in the archives. Was Mrs Penketh guilty, or was she just a scapegoat? A thrilling detective hunt backwards through time.

### **11. *Charleston, Sussex: Keeping House for Bloomsbury***

Grace Higgens joined the unconventional Bell household aged 15 – and, for the next fifty years, propped up the 'Bloomsbury Set' in London and at Charleston. Vanessa Bell couldn't live without her housekeeper's cooking – or her regular posing as an artist's model. Virginia Woolf tried to poach her for her baking. Grace's candid diaries paint a picture of bohemia rather different to the official narrative.

## **STUDY DAYS**

### **The Fabulous World of London's Lost Department Stores**

London's sumptuous Victorian and Edwardian department stores changed the capital – and changed its women. Shoppers of every rank were lavishly wooed, seduced and often undone by the temptations laid out before them in these new 'cathedrals of desire'. But as consumerism reached ever more frenzied levels, the natural world began to suffer.

This varied and fascinating day brings to life the untold stories behind objects, institutions and 'invisible' people of the Victorian and Edwardian era.

You'll learn about:

**LECTURE ONE:** Department stores and the rise of consumption.

**LECTURE TWO:** The cautionary tale of Heather Firbank, the Edwardian shopaholic whose entire couture wardrobe ended up in the V&A.

**LECTURE THREE:** The feather trade, 'murderous millinery', and the brave women who pushed back by founding the RSPB.

**OR** – if you wish to keep the tone lighter –

**LECTURE THREE:** Art Deco and the Department Store, from roof gardens to curved glass walls, Coronation fever to marketing stunts.

This is a full day study day, and is my most popular. It also works well as a half study day, with two lectures.

## HALF STUDY DAY

### **Department Stores & Debutantes: The birth of consumerism – and the fall of Heather Firbank, Edwardian shopaholic**

Two lectures linking the Edwardian golden age of London's fabulous department stores with a cautionary tale: a young debutante in thrall to fashion.

You'll learn about:

#### **LECTURE ONE:**

The rise of consumerism in the Victorian era, reaching a frenzied peak in the Edwardian era. The sales tactics of the smartest big stores; the fabulous architectural rebuilds; the fantasy environments that seduced shoppers.

The invisible sales assistants, known as 'servants of the counter', and the mercurial bosses they served. The push for better working conditions.

#### **LECTURE TWO**

Heather Firbank's wardrobe diary:

From the country house 'Saturday to Monday' party, to the risqué fashion shows of couturier Lucile, this is an intimate portrait of shopping, high society, seduction and ruin in the years leading up to the Great War. The Heather Firbank collection is owned by the V&A – but how did it end up there?

## STUDY DAY

### ***The Housekeeper's Tale***

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 housekeeper was up against capricious mistresses, low pay, no job security and gruelling physical labour. Until now, her story has never been told. Delving into secret diaries, unpublished letters and the neglected service archives of our stately homes, Tessa Boase tells the extraordinary stories behind some of Britain's most prominent households.

#### **LECTURE ONE: 'A good Housekeeper is not easily got at' – The Victorian Era**

We discover more about this unique position by examining a bundle of letters discovered in the archives of Hatfield House, charting the meticulous hunt for a housekeeper to serve Queen Victoria's prime minister, Lord Salisbury, in 1890. Who were the 59 hopeful applicants – and what, precisely, was Lady Salisbury looking for?

We then move to the story of Mrs Wells of Uppark, who fell some way short of the ideal. Mrs Sarah Wells – mother to the writer H.G. Wells – kept a revelatory diary for the 14 years she toiled below stairs at Uppark. She was an elderly, anxious woman working in a notoriously old-fashioned household. But what grated most was that her mistress was born a mere dairy farmer's daughter...

**LECTURE TWO: When Things Went Badly Wrong – The Edwardian Era**

What were the fault-lines of this very particular role? How was the housekeeper supported in times of crisis? How important was a good mistress? In this explosive story about cook-housekeeper Ellen Penketh, of Erddig Hall in Wales, we discover how a socially anxious Edwardian mistress, an insufficient income, and a very long leash for servants, created the perfect storm for a scandal in 1907.

**LECTURE THREE: 'Dangerous & Disorderly' – The 20th-Century**

This period of dramatic change for British domestic servants is embodied by the triumphant figure of housekeeper Hannah Mackenzie. Hannah's career in service spanned extremes of fortune and circumstance – from the Edwardian conservative nouveau riche, to a country house Great War hospital, to the American super rich of the Roaring Twenties, and onwards to personal freedom.

We finish the day by looking at the life of a contemporary housekeeper, Nicky Garner of Holkham Hall in Norfolk. How has the role changed, and how has the English country house adapted to the modern world?