

TESSA BOASE

Lecture titles

HOUR LONG LECTURES:

1. Fashion, Fury and Feminism: Women's Fight for Change

When social historian **Tessa Boase** told the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds 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.

2. 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? An intimate portrait of shopping, high society, seduction and ruin in the years leading up to the Great War.

3. The Housekeeper's Tale: The Women Who Really Ran the English Country House

As the most senior of upper servants, the housekeeper typically 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 she has not been remembered history. Using old letters, secret diaries and neglected archives, Tessa has resurrected a series of fascinating stories from 19th and 20th century domestic service, at some of our most prominent households.

Each possible lecture (below) sets this role in its historic context, looks at some of the individual stories uncovered, then focuses more deeply on an individual housekeeper's tale. Choose from:

3A. 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. But what grated most was that her mistress was born a mere dairy farmer's daughter...

3B. 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.

3C. 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.

3D. Charleston, Sussex: Keeping House for Bloomsbury

Grace Higgs 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.