

Visitors to Audley End House are receiving a real

The Victorians di

EMMA HIGGINBOTHAM
 dons a mop cap and
apron to prepare lunch
at the newly-restored
Audley End's
Service Wing.

WHICH do you think would be a harder job: being a skivvy in a Victorian kitchen? Or pretending to be a skivvy in a Victorian kitchen for the viewing pleasure of tourists? Well take it from me, neither is a doddle.

Following a million pound renovation, Audley End House has opened its Service Wing to the public for the first time.

The magnificent kitchen, scullery, laundry and dairy have been beautifully restored, and if you visit at the right time you will get more than a poster in a plastic case telling you what went on there.

Annie Gray, from Ely, is one of seven "interpreters" working at the Jacobean mansion. As kitchen maid 'Mary Ann', she spends the day cooking and answers visitors' questions as if she is a real-life Victorian.

"We have a list of points to get across about the way the Victorian house worked, and we use costume, character and props to convey that to the public," explained Annie. "We are not trained actors and we are not pure researchers, we are a bit of both, really."

The interpreters range from laundry maids to gardeners, and



KEEN EYE: Kitchen maid Mary Ann (Annie Gray) keeps a watchful eye her on latest Farrance) are up to scratch in the Victorian kitchen of Audley End House.

READY FOR USE: Pots and pans in the Victorian kitchen and, below Emma prepares her ladyship's chocoate. 490649.



use the names of real servants who worked at Audley End, taken from the 1881 census.

On the day of my visit, Sylvanus the gamekeeper was patrolling the grounds and the scullery maid, confusingly called Annie, was busy with dogsbody chores. "She's like the scum, and we all get to bully her horribly," grinned the real Annie, as she helped me into my costume.

Imagine being grabbed by King Kong and you will have some idea of what it's like to wear a corset. You can't breathe and your voice goes up an octave, but according to Annie, they are vital: "We cook all the way through the day, and corsets give you a lot of support," she said.

"You have to bend at the knees and use your thighs to get up again, so it's a really good workout. If people were in costume more often they wouldn't need to do Pilates."

Luckily I was spared the usual kitchen maid's chores of lighting the stove and polishing the copper pans, and took the soft option of preparing spiced hot chocolate and a vegetable curry for the elderly Lady Braybrooke's breakfast. Er - curry for breakfast?

"Oh yes. Because of the influence of the Raj, it was all the rage," explained Annie, and set me to work slicing up veggies from Audley End's garden.

All the interpreters use regional dialects, but as every accent I attempt comes out as Indian, I stuck to my normal voice. Fortunately most of the visitors seemed to be German that morning, and hopefully didn't notice.

Feeling irrationally confident, I told anyone who would listen why I was making curry for breakfast ("It's all the rage, you know,") but struggled when asked to identify strange-looking kitchen implements - turbot pan, anyone? Luckily Annie was never far away.

It was wonderfully atmospheric to actually be cooking in the lofty kitchen, with my footsteps echoing on the polished stone floor.

Not everything was authentic, of course: supermarket curry powder had been subtly poured into jars, the stove runs on electricity, and we cooked with modern pans. "The old copper ones would give you verdigris poisoning," whispered Annie.

But still it was all rather convincing, even if tourists in shorts did keep wandering

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girl Emma, right, and makes sure scullery maid Annie (Charlotte Nash) and gamekeeper Sylvanus (Julian Pictures: David Johnson 490639).

and spoiling the effect. g Annie as the bustling, sense northerner Mary is more like watching a p comedian than a al interpreter, as she the cowering scullery d moaned about the servants. ept the visitors laughing rning as I made Lady oke's spiced hot te, which turned out to The curry was delicious even if I say so myself. all for the interpreters' ryingthing you cook" idea. hat because the public ink what we are doing is

fake." explained Annie. "Even if you bring a steaming hot chicken out of the oven they'll say: 'It's plastic!' and poke it."

Surprisingly this is not Annie's day job. She's a PhD student specialising in food history, so there's very little she doesn't know about the subject, although the occasional visitor does try to catch her out: "Sometimes they'll say 'Ooh, there's a lion mark on that egg,' so we just smile, because there's nothing we can do.

"But most people want to play the game, and engage very fully with the fact that you are in character. I love it. It is hard

work, and even though we are doing a 10th of what people would have been doing in the period, I've got true Victorian calluses all over my hands. But it is great fun.

"People come up and say 'You've made my day,' or 'Isn't it fabulous the way you bring it all to life?' which is really nice on an ego-boosting level.

"It's lovely to think that I've made their day better and that, in the nasty monstrosity of human existence, they have had a really enjoyable time."

■ The interpreters are at Audley End every Sunday, and from Wednesday to Sunday during the school holidays.

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day in the life

WHEN maid
 ey End in
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 with one
 y off every
 nt. This
 be a typical

sure kitchen is clean and swept; help the scullery maid to black the stove and light the fires; help prepare servants' breakfast.

7.30am: Help to prepare the family's breakfast; clear away the servants' breakfast and eat your own

when you can.
 8.30am: Extra chores, including polishing the servants' boots.
 9.30am: Clear away the family's breakfast, wash up, clean the kitchen.
 10am: Half-hour break while cook confers with Lady Braybrooke.

10.30am: Help to prepare lunch for the family, who eat at 1pm, and servants, who eat at 2pm.
 2pm: More washing up.
 3pm: Time off for personal chores – sewing, laundry, airing the bed.
 4pm: Help to prepare servants'

tea; Snack on lunch leftovers.
 5pm: Help to prepare family's dinner, to be ready at 8pm.
 9.30pm: Clear away dinner and clean the kitchen.
 10.30pm: Retire to your shared bedroom.
 11pm: Lights out.

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