



Harriet Lister – Housemaid

My name is Harriet Lister and I am 19 years old, I work as a housemaid in a large house in London. My day begins at 6am when I make a cup of tea for Mrs Sawyer who is the Housekeeper. After the mistress, Mrs Sawyer is the most important person in the house so it's very important to keep on the right side of her unless you like being in trouble!

My first job of the day is to light the fires in the downstairs rooms, it's a dirty job and I'm always glad to wash my hands before taking hot water up to the family bedrooms for them to start getting ready for their day.

While they are busy we make a start on the laundry by putting the clothes to soak. There are six people in the family here and it's amazing how many outfits they wear each day.

While the family are at breakfast, I make the beds and clean the bedrooms before moving downstairs to dust, polish the brasses and sweep the floors. This has to be done before visitors start arriving.

Once the house is clean, it is then time to go and continue with the laundry. We are up to our elbows in soap suds as we scrub the clothes until they are clean and then we rinse and rinse and rinse again before wringing the water out of them and hanging them out to dry. My hands are often very sore, especially in winter.

During the day, I have to carry scuttles full of coal around the house to make sure the fires don't go out, it's heavy work. As soon the washing is dry we start on the ironing.

We never stop working from the moment we get up to the moment we drop into bed about half past ten at night. Still, I am very lucky because once a month I get to go home and see my mother and father for half a day and Mrs Sawyer sometimes lets me take some cakes and biscuits for them.

List of Rules Given to Harriet on her First Day

1. When spoken to, stand straight, keep your hands still and always look at the person speaking to you.
2. Never let your voice be heard by the ladies and gentlemen of the household unless they have spoken to you.
3. Never address the ladies and gentlemen unless you are delivering a message.
4. When you receive an order, always use the proper address, 'Sir', 'Ma'am' or 'Miss'.
5. Never offer your opinion to your employer.
6. Always give room when you encounter your betters in the house, that is to say make yourself as invisible as possible and avert your eyes.
7. If you are required to walk with a lady or gentleman in order to carry packages, always walk a few paces behind.
8. You may not receive any relative, visitor or friend into the house.
9. You may not receive any relative, visitor or friend into the Servant's Hall without the consent of the Housekeeper.
10. Any breakages or damages will be deducted from your wages.

Harriet's bedroom would be very simple, containing a wooden bed, straight-back wooden chair, dresser and basic washstand. She could expect to be paid ten pounds seven shillings a year.

Harriet Lister – Housemaid

Section A

Choose the best word or group of words to fit the passage and put a ring around your choice.

My name is Harriet Lister and I work as a housemaid. My day begins at

- 1 **5 am** **6am** **7am** **8am**

when I make a cup of tea for

- 2 **Harriet.** **the mistress.** **Mrs Sawyer.** **Lister.**

My first job of the day is to

- 3 **put on the light.** **make the tea.** **heat the water.** **light the fires.**

Next I take

- 4 **breakfast** **hot water** **clean clothes** **polished shoes**

up to the family bedrooms for them to start getting ready. During the day I have to carry

- 5 **wet washing** **ironing** **a sweeping brush** **scuttles full of coal**

around the house to make sure the fires do not go out. We drop into bed about

- 6 **half past nine** **ten o'clock** **half past ten** **eleven o'clock**

at night. I am lucky because once a month I get to go home and see my mother and father for half a day.

Section B

- 1 Who is the most important person in the house?

- 2 Why is it important to keep on the right side of Mrs Sawyer?

- 3 Why do you think the first job of the day is to light the fires?

- 4 Why is there so much laundry to do in this house?

- 5 'My hands are often very sore, especially in winter.' Why do you think this is the case?

- 6 What do you understand by the term 'scuttle full of coal'?

- 7 Give two reasons why Harriet thinks she is very lucky?

- 8 What does the rule 'Never address the ladies and gentlemen unless you are delivering a message,' mean?

- 9 Rule 7 states 'If you are required to walk with a lady or gentleman in order to carry packages, always walk a few paces behind.' Why do you think this rule was written?

Section C

Imagine you are a maid or servant in a large Victorian house. Write a timetable for your long day fitting in as many different jobs as you can.

Answers

Harriet Lister

Section A

- 1) 6am
- 2) Mrs Sawyer
- 3) light the fires
- 4) hot water
- 5) scuttles full of coal
- 6) half past ten

Section B

- 1) The mistress.
- 2) To avoid getting into trouble.
- 3) Accept an answer that indicates it is important to light the fires to warm the house/heat the water before the rest of the household get up.
- 4) There is washing for six people and they change their clothes several times during the day.
- 5) Harriet has her hands in water a lot and in cold weather this will make them very sore. Do not accept an answer that simply says it is winter.
- 6) A scuttle is an old fashioned container for carrying coal.
- 7) She is given time off from work once a month to see her parents for half a day.
Mrs Sawyer sometimes allows her to take cakes and biscuits.
- 8) You must never speak to the ladies or gentlemen unless they speak to you first or you are asked to give them a message.
- 9) To show that the lady or gentleman is more important than the servant.