

# They just can't get the staff! The dilemma facing the 0.01%

**The butler's gone back to Europe, beds are unmade — the super-rich can't get the help they're used to. Helen Kirwan-Taylor on their first-world problems**

Helen Kirwan-Taylor

Monday November 01 2021, 12.01am, The Times

Brexit



Recruitment agency Polo & Tweed says demand for staff has increased by 400 per cent but job applications have fallen by half

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“I’m sorry but we have to cancel dinner on Friday,” said the WhatsApp message on my phone. As no reason was given, I asked if all was OK, assuming it was Covid as usual. “I can’t find any staff,” replied the hostess who had two couples staying that weekend and lives one village away from us in the Cotswolds.

This is a woman who has seen the interiors of every plane on the NetJet fleet. She owns an art collection worthy of a museum and no longer drives herself because “car time’s the best time to work”. Her in-between lifestyle (Cotswolds/Notting Hill) was once as seamless as a Hervé Léger dress, but things have clearly changed.

“My guests expect a house to run like Claridge’s,” she says. “I’m simply not prepared to change their sheets daily.” As is now standard practice, her live-in couple only work one out of three weekends. To entertain regularly, she relies on local freelance staff, which are now as rare as a *T. rex* fossil. The same double whammy of Brexit and Covid that has had restaurants, hotels and event planners fighting each other for (increasingly well-paid) workers has taken its toll on the ever-so-glamorous town and country set.



Experts say the wealthy are simply not prepared to do basic domestic tasks themselves

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“The demand for staff has increased by 400 per cent, but we’ve seen 50 per cent less applications by candidates for each of our jobs, due to staff shortages,” says Lucy Challenger, the CEO and founder of Polo & Tweed, a top recruitment agency. As a result, many of her country clients are “stranded”, she says.

An alternative idea might have been for my friend to take her guests out to the local bouji pub favoured by Kate Moss and the like, but wait: no staff are to be found there either. I recently had lunch at a sought-after restaurant where a waiter said he couldn’t seat us even though half the tables were empty. “Why?” we asked. “We don’t have enough people to man them,” he replied.

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The pandemic warmed even the greatest of urbanites to the benefits of fresh air and privacy, and now, just as they settle down to enjoy the fruits of their wealth, reality hits.

“Things are so bad that some people are closing down their country houses completely,” says Philip Hooper, managing director of the interior designer Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler, who recently had to play florist to one of his clients because the butler had quit (and returned to Europe). “In particular I’m hearing that security people simply refuse to work outside of London. Much better to be in a mansion in Mayfair on a wet December night given the choice,” he says.

Particularly when you consider the work involved in maintaining one of these country retreats. And let’s be clear — this is not “low-skilled” work. Large Cotswold houses are virtually indistinguishable from five-star hotels.

Their amenities (indoor/outdoor pools, cinemas, gyms, wine cellars, Olympic equestrian paddocks, laundry blocks with dry cleaning machines, offices, multiple out houses) are just as good, if not better. “People are buying large houses with no

idea how they work,” says Nuria Cantera, managing director of Manto Household Management, who trains staff and was once a housekeeper herself.

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“I see husbands giving servants a set of instructions so sophisticated you want to cry. Houses now have rooms and rooms to run the garage and power the TVs, modems and security. Every house has underfloor heating and special wall-high towel rails to keep the towels and bathrobes warm. It takes at least two people to change a Savoir bed,” she says.

I recently went to a party at one of the largest estates in the Cotswolds manned by hundreds. The security man chaperoning us to the front door admitted that his employers had never stayed in the house alone because “they don’t know how to use it”. The kitchen contains every smart device known to man. Rather than reading the manuals, this family employ people who have. At a price: housekeepers can earn up to £85,000 a year and security up to £130,000.

“The smart home is something that is so terrifying in terms of technology, security, climate control, music and AV that you need full-time technicians to troubleshoot as it cannot be done remotely,” Hooper says. “We architects and designers have created an incredibly complicated maintenance regime which requires multiple people to look after. I can see situations arising when it all goes wrong and it cannot be fixed for days — no hot water, no IT. It will make the house unliveable.”

As well as Brexit and the pandemic exodus, there is another problem: domestic life doesn’t end at 5pm. Dinner parties in the country often go on late; someone has to stay up and clear dishes, and that can no longer be the same person who set the table.

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“People used to expect their staff to work 12-24 hours a day and they simply won’t do it,” Cantera says. “The pandemic has made everyone reconsider their work-life

balance.” Cleaners, housekeepers and nannies now demand to work in shifts (two weeks on, two weeks off, or 7am-3pm, 3-11pm daily with breaks), which requires second teams and back-ups for holidays. The whole thing goes up in smoke, of course, when one comes down with Covid. (A propos of which, a wealthy employer I know set down a “staff must be vaccinated” rule, only to find she no longer had any.)

“People have started to realise that the balance of power has shifted,” says Catherine Bear, a Stow-on-the-Wold interior designer who often steps in and fills the fridge when the housekeeper is off. “The us and them is now more about them.”

That she charges £150 an hour for her design service does not deter. “My clients will call me to change lightbulbs and remove dead flies from windowsills,” she says. At least Bear is prepared to do it. Two of my closest friends are high-end interior designers based in the Cotswolds. Both have handed in their resignations.

“Two years of Brexit/Covid nightmare has pushed us over the edge,” says one. “The fact the clients treat us like servants doesn’t help either. One calls lunch meetings. Her chef brings her an elaborate meal on a tray, but my team is not so much as offered a coffee.

“I feel like a European lorry driver: just give me somewhere to shower and have breakfast and I’ll be OK, but they can’t even do that,” they add.

Designers themselves used to rely on a host of hard-working local suppliers to make things run smoothly (curtain-makers, curtain-hangers, upholsterers, craftsmen and so on), but they are also in short supply and therefore often late. “So we get all the blame,” she says.

Some clever entrepreneurs such as Chris Davey, aka the Cotswolds Guy, are offering badly needed solutions. Davey has recently opened up a luxury farm shop

in Guiting Power (clients include David Beckham and Liv Tyler) that delivers delicious freshly-made beef wellingtons (and vegetarian/fish equivalents) to your front door. The best bit? They'll also send staff.

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Not that I should be calling them that. The word “staff” is now inappropriate. It should be “talent”, a Goldman Sachs consultant once explained. When chief technology officers first appeared on the scene in the 1990s, they were so scarce that they could do anything they liked: arrive late or not at all. The same can now be said about domestic “staff”. “The worm has turned,” my friend Chris Harvey of Octant, a strategic brand consultancy, says. “One must now regard one’s gardener, cleaner or nanny as a combination of Beyoncé and the *Princess and the Pea*.” Talent does not have to look over its shoulders at eager eastern Europeans prepared to do the job for half the price. “Therefore he or she must be managed as such,” says an advertising director who lives in my village and demands anonymity so as not to upset his precious staff. “First, you must subjugate your ego to theirs. Second, you must praise them incessantly, regardless of how incompetent they are.”

Despite entrepreneurial wheezes such as Davey’s, the seamless in-between lifestyle is at risk of extinction. “The wealthy are simply not prepared to make their own beds,” Challenger says. “They won’t compromise on standards, which means paying way beyond the going rate. It’s a hard pill to swallow.”

If and when they do, they upset the locals (who now pay £20 an hour for a cleaner and it still doesn’t guarantee the person is decently trained). “There’s a lot of doubling up now,” she says. “The housekeeper becomes the florist even though she has no experience, and the handyman becomes the gardener who then wrecks the fragile woodland garden.”

As a result, clients are asking for a different kind of house. “Clients say they don’t want marble and brass that needs to be polished any more,” Hooper says, “they want tiles that can easily be washed.” They also want four bedrooms rather than ten.

Heaven forbid. But who can blame them? In-betweening with three sets of dirty super-king — albeit Frette — sheets in the back of the car is no one’s idea of “glamorous”.