



**‘Gary’s curiosity was piqued, try as he might he couldn’t quite shake the pull of grand English country estates’**

and meticulous staff is going through the roof. And he predicts an uptick in hiring post-Covid. For him, entering service proved the culmination of years spent flitting from one job to the next in search of his true calling.

Then he came across the movie adaptation of *Remains of the Day* and was utterly taken with Anthony Hopkins’s performance as a fanatically loyal butler. Gary’s curiosity was piqued. Try as he might he couldn’t shake the pull of grand English country estates. “It just kept popping up in my head,” says Brighton-born Gary, who emigrated to South Africa with his family when he was nine years old.

“Working in some of the most beautiful places in the world was appealing to me. Then, I thought, ‘I wonder if butlers still exist?’ So I did some research and that’s when I found the Ivor Spencer School [for Butlers] in London. I decided to remortgage my house, take a huge risk, move back to England and study under him.” He was 35.

Newly qualified, he was hired as head butler at the Ritz London, catering to such exalted guests as Anna Wintour and Margaret Thatcher. “I found my passion. I was nervous at first but then I realised that people are all the same: they all want straight service, the way they want it.” He went on to work as Major Domo at Studley Royal House in



## LIVE TO SERVE

Ever wondered what it would be like to have your own Carson? **Marion Sauvebois** spoke to Gary Williams, principal of the British Butler Institute, to find out about the butler’s life

“**S**hall I tell you about Pugsy the dog?” Gary Williams chuckles softly. Butlers are duty-bound to tackle anything lobbed their way: mineral, vegetable and, occasionally, animal. A shoot was underway.

Having diagnosed her furry companion with an acute case of homesickness, a guest tasked Gary with repatriating her pooch home from the North of England to Oxford – via helicopter. “Of course, I’m not going to say to her, ‘How do you know she’s homesick?’” he quips. “The helicopter arrived, we did a little wave off.

It was a bit of theatre. We had a lot of fun actually,” recalls the 59-year-old, who, after serving Britain’s finest houses and a coterie of tycoons to boot now trains the next

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generation of lifestyle managers, royal genies, super-yacht chief stewardesses (butlers go by many names these days) as principal of the British Butler Institute. But back to Pugsy.

Gary kept tabs on the pug’s whereabouts and general mood until she made it safely home.

“Every ten minutes I would go back to the guest with an update. ‘Spoke to the pilot, no

turbulence, Pugsy is resting,’” he goes on, his easy-going nature and readiness to laugh at odds with the enduring image of the haughty, stiff-upper-lipped servant. “I spoke to the butler on the other end and told him Pugsy was coming home because she was homesick and he said, ‘What, again?’”

You can never predict what your “principal” – industry jargon for employer – or indeed their guests will require on any given day. Therein lies the sheer joy (there is nothing but delight in Gary’s voice as he relates Pugsy’s cushy homeward journey) and the inherent challenge of waiting on a great household.

Gary’s unorthodox career choice may seem anachronistic but, it is quite the opposite, he assures me. As the one per cent get wealthier, the demand for impeccably trained, discreet



North Yorkshire, before serving the world’s elite, from IT billionaires to members of international royal families and Russian oligarchs. The latter proved a tad trickier.

A cultural disconnect combined with “new money” epicureanism has added a new layer of complexity to the role, and manifold duties, of a butler in the 21st century. “Working for Russians was a very different kettle of fish,” he readily admits. “They are very demanding and not the easiest of communicators. It was all on a different scale.

“They taught me [how to be an] ‘extreme concierge’. Let’s say they went on holiday on the Italian coast, you’d have to book four or five restaurants for lunch, then five for dinner at different times, because they change their minds a lot. I might have been taught formal service but they don’t want that, they want pizza on their lap in front of the TV. Whatever they want, it has to be done beautifully.”

This is not a job for the easily rattled or faint of heart. “What you need is an incredible eye for detail, discretion at all times. You need to be flexible, anticipate beautifully and you need to get on with people. You have to be friendly but not familiar,” he sums up. “It’s all about relaxed, professional service.”





With only period drama depictions of “stiff penguins” for reference, it is hard for anyone to fully understand what being a modern-day butler entails (though some butlers are still asked to “dress on the formal side, it just depends”). Would-be employers’ grasp of the post and its core function can be superficial at best, when not puzzling.

**‘They see a butler as a status symbol, especially in the far East, it’s like having the latest Louis Vuitton handbag’**

A man from Shanghai once rang Gary up at the Institute asking for 200 butlers. “He was building 200 villas and each villa came with a butler. He said, ‘They must stand there, open and close the door, that’s it’. I said to him, ‘I’m sorry we can’t help you’. He wanted doormen. New money don’t always know what a butler should do and how much they do,” he adds. “They see a butler as a status symbol, especially in the far East. It’s like having the latest Louis Vuitton handbag.”

Another pervading stereotype is that this is a male-dominated industry. Far from it. Half of his trainees are women. A scan of the British Butler Institute’s teaching modules offers a fascinating, if dizzying, window into the high-stakes world of waiting on the glitterati.



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Fish carving, shirt pressing (“the traditional things you’d see Mr Carson do in Downton Abbey”), log fire set-up, caviar knowledge, cigar etiquette... The list goes on and on (16 pages’ worth). “You won’t need to use all those skills in every job, but you need to know all of them to be employable,” explains Gary.

Even such a thorough curriculum can’t quite cover everything the new generation will face. Nor can it prepare them for the fraught task of sussing out their employers’ needs.

“We have these principal interviews where ask them what they want and how they want it but a lot of these people don’t have time or don’t want to do it. So your job is to become a detective. You arrive in a house and you’ll hopefully have some stuff left over from the prior butler. Then you’ll question the housekeepers, the drivers, the security people. You’ll speak to one or two of the PAs. You’re building up a picture.

“When you deliver, say, the tea service in the afternoon you might hear the Lady say, ‘I like that or I don’t like that’. Then you set up a tea tray for her and ask her, ‘Is this acceptable?’. She might say, ‘Finally, it is’. So you take a photograph of the tray to remember how to do it. Although that might change because she doesn’t drink peppermint tea anymore, she drinks camomile now...”

The Institute’s syllabus is geared to personal development (see the “Zen guide to the British Butler” module), deportment and confidence. More than in any other



industry, first impressions, communication and resilience are cornerstones. Gary details all of this and more, sharing decades of insider knowledge and wisdom in his book, Excellence: The Empirical 5 Golden Pillars of Life in Service. Those who make the cut are handsomely rewarded for their graft. According to Gary, a butler can expect to earn between £38,000 and £45,000 with accommodation thrown in, expenses and, on occasion, a car. This goes up to between £50,000 and £150,000 for a head butler post.

Over the years Gary has mastered the art of the poker face. Then again, once in a while, along comes a homesick pooch... It doesn’t matter how much training you’ve had,” he says, a warm belly laugh bubbling up. “You have to try, but sometimes you must be looking surprised.” What’s the protocol in such a situation? “You say, ‘Certainly, please allow me to arrange that’.”

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