

## Victorian role-play at Preston Manor

**Source: Anra Kennedy**

Mrs Storey is the dignified and formidable housekeeper of Preston Manor. With a brisk swish of her starched skirts she leads a rather nervous pack of seven year-olds into the grand entrance hall.

As she welcomes the year three class from Northmead Junior School, only the adults watching notice the twinkle in her eye. The children are all too busy concentrating on standing poker straight and keeping fingers out of pockets and noses. Dressed in oversized flat caps and braces or long skirts and woolly shawls, the pupils look far too healthy to be visiting from a Victorian poorhouse, but are suitably awed by their surroundings.

Prior to the visit the children have applied by letter for jobs at the Manor. There are a number of posts vacant, ranging from housemaid and footman to the humble 'oddman'. Today Mrs Storey and her Head Housemaid, Miss Rose, will show the applicants around the Manor and give them the opportunity to try out a range of household tasks.

The role-play session is based around life at the Manor, as it was when Mr and Mrs Thomas Stanford lived there in Victorian times. The visit is fast-paced, with the emphasis very much upon learning through action. Never have I seen children so desperate to be given a turn with a duster or a dustpan and brush.

The group splits in two for a whirlwind tour. We visit the dining room, the drawing room, the kitchen, a maid's bedroom, Mrs Stanford's bedroom, the scullery and the boot hall.

En route children learn the right way to fold newspaper for fire lighting, to damp down dust with a sprinkle of used tea leaves before sweeping rugs, to fold linen napkins, lay silverware and make gingerbread biscuits. They churn milk for butter, make a lemonade volcano, polish shoes, buff brass doorplates and squeeze the gardener's socks through a mangle.

At the end of the visit the children gather in the entrance hall again for a plenary session. Mrs Storey asks them to shout out a magic word and, lo and behold, she's Penny, a twenty-first century museum education officer. Penny talks them through the visit and activities, answers questions and reassures the more nervous visitors that they don't really have to report for duty the following week.

Fiona Ridley, the children's teacher, is an old hand at these sessions and looked every inch the Victorian schoolmarm in an elegant black outfit. This was the fourth time she'd brought children on this trip. I asked Fiona what she felt were the benefits of the trip and how she incorporated it into her teaching.

'The children have a deeper understanding of Victorian life from the viewpoint of a lower class Victorian worker. They are able to experience hands-on activities with real artefacts. They are able to talk openly about the Victorian lifestyle following on from the visit and understand how different our lifestyle is compared to the Victorians.

'Before the trip the children are told that we will be applying for jobs at Preston Manor. As part of their literacy work they all write a letter of application to Lord and

Lady Stamford. We also ask the parents to write a reference in the role of the child's employer. During the visit we always ask the children and staff to dress up.

'Following the trip the children write an account of the trip, and they also use their ICT skills to copy and paste different jobs into the correct servant box. Linked in with the visit they also use their knowledge on the washday to draw their own washing line and washing equipment.

'When the actors are in full character the children thoroughly gain a deeper understanding of the whole experience. If it were just a tour many of the children, being so young, would find the visit boring. However they are very enthusiastic about the trip and it is regarded as the best Year 3 trip.'

Role-play sessions like these are often called 'living history' workshops or sessions. For details of living history museums and events around the country search [www.24hourmuseum.org.uk](http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk).