

## A SERVITOR'S LIFE AT OXFORD.

**Thomas Garratt** left his father's farm, in West Haddon in Northamptonshire in 1690, to further his education at Pembroke College, Oxford, he was 15 years and 9 months old. He was to be a '*servitor*' an individual who received their lodging and most of their board free, and was excused lecture fees, in return for acting as a servant to the fellows. *Not quite as easy as it seems.....*

**Oxford** was, according to popular conception, a place where peers and rich men sent their sons in order that they would receive a better education. It followed that the lower classes, who drudged all day in the effort to keep body and soul together, left Oxford outside their calculations when discussing the prospective education of their children. Oxford was a place for rich men. How could their penniless sons go there? *As servitors.*

The statutes make mention of gentlemen commoners, and commoners, by far the largest rank of student at Oxford, fellows and scholars, who were at the University on scholarship, battelers, and at the bottom were the servitors.

Students retained the hierarchical nature of English society which was his at home.

A gentleman commoner is described as one who sat at the same table as the Masters and Bachelors; he alone of the undergraduates was allowed to wear his cap in the presence of a doctor; his entrance fee was 22s.; for a commoner and for a scholar 10s.; for a batteler 8s.6d.; for a servitor 5s. Although all graduates paid the same College fee to receive a degree, scholarships might be awarded to any class of undergraduate, depending on academic promise.

Each rank of student had its own costume, the noblemen stood out in fine clothes. In starkest contrast, at the other end of the spectrum, the servitors' gowns were of plain black stuff, and their caps, instead of the square academic cap, were round and sometimes derisively called cow-pats.

As a "servitor" they lived as a butler to 3 or 4 highly placed students. A servitor lived on whatever scraps of clothing or money they gave him, and it was forbidden for students of a higher rank to speak to them, they were not allowed to take their meals with their fellow-students. For a commoner to be seen in public in the company of a servitor was a "*great disparagement*", consequently, if a servitor was sufficiently blessed to be able to call a commoner friend, he had to visit him secretly, or under cover of darkness.

But there was no more shame or degradation in service inside the University than outside it, nor at one time were menial offices considered to disgrace. Why should they? Their poverty at Oxford was in no way different from the way they had lived previous to their arrival there. It was merely a change in locality.

The servitors of a college were not poor gentlemen, but came from the plough and the shop; they gained their education in exchange for waiting on their fellow students.

But many of the servitors were physically sick at first coming up, and most servitors left rather than endure the humiliation.

As errand boys and odd-job hands, they were at liberty to pick up what education they could in the intervals of performing menial tasks for the gentlemen commoners. They cleaned boots, fetched and carried, they would wash their clothes, shine their shoes, and do their homework, and they were the servants of anybody who choose to order them about. They had no social interaction with the gentlemen commoners, and were treated with scant courtesy by the college servants.

One servitor's rooms were immediately above his 'masters', besides being at his master's beck and call, was very often the slave of his master's mistress which created a great deal of uneasiness and discomfort.

Because they were poor they wore their clothes like a badge of poverty, and in these clothes they had to go to the Buttery and procure game, capons, and ribs of beef for some gentleman commoner's dinner, while for themselves there was nothing but "*Poor scraps and Cold as I'm a sinner.*"

Having no money they slept in coal-holes, cupboards under the stairs, a lumber-room in the apex of the building, or attics under the eaves, and satisfied the pangs of hunger by picking up the crumbs which fell from the rich men's tables.

While the less promising were employed on the most menial errands, the more literate seem to have been noticed and given patronage by the occupation of copying, or earning odd pence by writing out the impositions which their masters had been condemned by the Proctors.

Other methods of pocket filling for servitors were mentioned by Dr Johnson, who said: "*Three hours a day stolen from sleep and amusement will produce it, let a servitor transcribe the quotations, and interleave them with references to save time.*" However, as servitors were not admitted within the Bodleian Library, transcription was necessarily limited, this was a cause of a great outcry at the time from the gentlemen commoners, who were very vocal in pressing that their servitors may transcribe manuscripts for them, otherwise they were compelled to do the work themselves, and from the servitors because they were deprived of a means of earning a few extra necessary pence.

One Don commented "*in this college there are two groups of students, those who are addicted to reading Greek and drinking water, and those who are addicted to ale, tobacco and puns*".

The former were the servitors, or poor scholars, the latter were the gentlemen commoners.

Not all servitors appear to have suffered unduly from the usual depression caused by their hard lot, George Whitefield, a servitor at Pembroke in 1732, shared his rooms with other servitors, who frequently invited him to join them at the alehouse.

Dr Samuel Johnson who was at Pembroke as a servitor in 1728 said *“the difference between us Servitors and Gentlemen commoners, is this, that we are men of wit and no fortune and they are men of fortune and no wit”*.

**At Cambridge** they were called Sizars. Below is an extract from the Conclusion Book of Trinity College, Cambridge. Jan.16.1660-1

*Ordered also that no bachelor of what condition soever, nor any undergraduate, come into the upper butteries, save only a Sizar that is sent to see his Tutor's quantum, and then to stay no longer than is requisite for that purpose, under penalty of 6d for every time; but if any shall leap over the hatch or strike a butler or his servant, upon this account of being hindered to come into the butteries, he shall undergo the censure of the Master and Seniors.*

**Years** before Thomas was a servitor, there were those who thought the practice was demeaning.

*‘All this may seem at first sight to be easily avoided by a strict examination at the Universities, and so returning by the next carrier all that was sent up not fit for their purpose. But because many of their relations are oft-times persons of an inferiour condition, and who either by imprudent counselors, or else out of a tickling conceit of their son's being, forsooth, a University scholar, have purposely omitted all other opportunities of a livelihood, to return such would seem a very sharp and severe disappointment. Possibly it might be much better, if parents themselves, or their friends, would be much more wary of determining their children to the trade of learning. And if some of undoubted knowledge and judgment would offer their advice : and speak their hopes of a lad about thirteen or fourteen years of age : (which I'll assure you, Sir, may be done without conjuring) : and never omit to enquire whether his relations are able and willing to maintain him seven years at the University, or see some certain way of being continued there so long, by the help of friends, or others; as also upon no such condition as shall in likelihood deprive him of the greatest part of his studies.’*

*'For it is a common fashion of a great many to complement and invite inferiour people's children to the University, and then pretend to make such an all- bountiful provision for them, as they shall not fail of coming to a very eminent degree of learning. But when they come there, they shall save a servant's wages. They took, therefore, heretofore a very good method to prevent sizars overheating their brains : bed-making, chamber-sweeping, and water-fetching were doubtless great preservatives against too much vain philosophy. Now certainly such pretended favours and kindnesses as these are the most right down discourtesies in the world. For it is ten times more happy both for a lad and the Church, to be a corn-cutter, or tooth-drawer, to make or mend shoes, or to be of any inferiour profession, than to be invited to, and promised the conveniences of a*

*learned education, and to have his name only stand airing upon the college tables, and his chief business shall be to buy eggs and butter.'*

Eachard John, Master of Catharine Hall, 'Grounds and Occasions of the Contempt of the Clergy and Religion Enquired into,' 1670, pp. 15--17.

**Thomas Garratt** left Pembroke College just before he was ordained in 1696/97, one can only guess at the difference in him after 6-7 years in this environment after all he'd gone through, both good and bad.

## References

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Breen and Mudannayake, *Oxford Oddfellows and Other Funny Tales*.

## Servitor

*Like Cheesy-Pouch of Shon-ap-Shenkan,  
His Sandy Locks, with wide Hiatus,  
Like Bristles seem'd Erected at us.  
Clotted with Sweat, the Ends hung down;  
And made Resplendant Cape of Gown;  
Whose Cape was thin, and so Transparent,  
Hold it t' th' Light, you'd scarce beware on't.  
'Twixt Chin and Breast contiguous Band,  
Hung in an Obtuse Angle, and--  
It had a Latitude Canonick,  
And was as short as Stile Laconick.  
His Coat so greasy was, and torn  
That had you seen it, you'd ha' sworn  
'Twas Ten Years old when he was born.  
His Buttons fring'd, as is the Fashion,*

*In Gallick and Britannick Nation:  
Or, to speak like more Modern fellows,  
Their Moulds dropt out like ripe Brown-sheller..*

*His Leather Galligaskins rent,  
Made Artless. Music as he went;*

.....

*His Holey Stockins were ty'd up,  
One with a Band, one with a Rope.*

He is described as the son of an aspiring husbandman who hopes

*If he can get Prevarment here,  
Of Zeven or Eight -- Pounds a Year,  
To preach and sell a Cup of Beer  
To help it out, he'll get good Profit  
And make a pratty Bus'ness of it.*

When he first comes up;

*He struts, pulls off his Cap to no-Man;  
And to conceal, betrays the Plow-mans  
But checkt for 's Insolent Behaviour,  
And fearing to be out of Favour,*

.....

*His Duty h'as so much Regard of  
He'll Cap a Master twenty Yard off:  
To whom such Fear is him upon, Sir;  
When spoken to, he dares not Answer.  
I' th' Morn when call'd to Prayer-Bell,  
Doleful to him as Passing-Knell;  
From Garret lofty he descends  
By Ladder, which dire Fate portends.*

.....

*'Bout Dinner-time down comes the Lubber,  
When 's Belly (hungry Dog) cries Cubbord,*

*To get a Mess of Broth i' th' Kitchen,  
 Where he sees Dainties so bewitching,  
 As Turkies, Capons, Ribs of Beef,  
 No wonder if he plays the Thief;  
 And, like a Fox to Fowl Insidious,  
 When Cook has turn'd his Back, perfidious-  
 Ly--whips off Liver, or a Gizzard,  
 From pinion'd Wing of Bird; for 'tis hard  
 To suffer Tantalus his Fate-  
 To see, and smell, and yet not eat.  
 Poor Scraps, and Cold, as I'm a Sinner,  
 Being all that he can get for Dinner.  
 Once out of Curiosity--  
 What Lodging th' had, I needs must see;  
 A Room with Dirt, and Cobwebs lin'd,  
 Which here and there with Spittle shin'd;  
 Inhabited, let's see-- by Four;  
 If I mistake not, 'twas no more.  
 Two Buggy-beds . . .  
 Their Dormer Windows with Brown-paper,  
 Was patch'd to keep out Northern Vapour.  
 The Tables broken Foot stood on,  
 An Old Schrevelious Lexicon,  
 Here lay together, Authors various,  
 From Homer's Iliad, to Cordelkis:  
 And so abus'd was Aristotle,  
 He only serv'd to stop a Bottle,  
 Or light a Pipe, of which were many,  
 On Chimney-piece, instead of Cheney;  
 Where eke stood Glass, Dark-Lanthorns ancient  
 Fragment of Mirrer, Penknife, Trencher, [sic]  
 And forty things which I can't mention.  
 Old Chairs and Stools, and such-like Lumber,  
 Compleatly furnisht out the Chamber.*

**'Servitor'**: a poem, written by a Servitor of the University of Oxford,

Printed and sold by H. Hills, 1709.

Just over a decade after Thomas left Oxford.