

SILVER



Words NIONE MEAKIN / Photography TOM OLDMAN

YOU'D NEVER CUT IT AT DOWNTON ABBEY IF
YOU HADN'T BEEN TO BUTLER SCHOOL



S E R V I C E



I

can feel my hand shaking as I carefully lower a gleaming silver platter down until it's level with the Duke of Edinburgh's plate. One slip and there will be veg all over the immaculately laid table and a seriously ticked-off Duke. Or so I imagine. In fact, the platter is empty, there's no wine in the cut crystal glasses and the 'Duke' is actually a 24-year-old Belgian called Joris who's gamely agreed to a bit of role play.

I'm at Oxfordshire's Ditchley Park, home to the Butler Valet School, where students like Joris come from

around the globe to learn everything from how to polish a pair of riding boots perfectly (tip: you'll need a bone) to how to discreetly advise a guest that their gown is tucked into their knickers. *Downton Abbey* may be fictional but the steady demand for butlers – in stately homes, on yachts and in plush holiday resorts – is real. And it's here in this 39-bedroom mansion, not far from the village of Charlbury, that many begin their esteemed careers, under the watchful gaze of the school's founder, Rick Fink. A friendly figure in steel-rimmed glasses, green apron and shoes shined the old-fashioned way, using polish burnished over a candle, 84-year-old Fink is an industry veteran who could teach even *Downton's* long-serving butler Mr Carson a thing or two.

"I saw one scene from the series where Carson was carrying three plates on his arm. One should never carry more than two!" Fink tuts. "The china we use costs £200-300 per individual plate."

Before opening the school in 2002, the former Royal Navy steward spent nearly six decades serving admirals, politicians and members of the Royal Family. He knows

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what time The Queen takes a cup of tea (5pm apparently) and how Tilda Swinton likes her eggs in the morning (he’s not saying). Still I think he may have bitten off more than he can chew in agreeing to tutor me. My last experience in hospitality was a stint waitressing at a local pub and I was swiftly demoted. Not to worry though – “The most important skill for a butler is discretion,” Fink says. Ah. That most famous of journalistic tools.

We’re in the West Wing of Ditchley Park, built in the 1700s by the second Earl of Lichfield and still considered

Left Our writer Nione and fellow student Joris get a Fink masterclass
Below Grape scissors and berry spoons
Below right Ditchley was built in 1722

one of the country’s finest houses. It’s not hard to imagine the Crawley family sweeping up its spooling drive or sitting down to dinner among the portraits peering gamely down from the walls of the Tapestry Room. Naturally, the house has enjoyed a starring role in *Downton Abbey*, appearing as Mallerton Hall in the show’s final season.

When Fink decided to open his butler school, Ditchley Park was the ideal location. He had originally toyed with the idea of opening a school abroad but was dissuaded by the father of one of his apprentices. “He said: ‘No, it needs to be in England, Rick’. It won’t work anywhere else. When the world thinks of butlers, they think of England,” Fink recalls.

He works from the old servants’ quarters, where the flagstone floors have been worn down by generations of staff summoned upstairs by a series of tinkling bells, including one connected to Winston Churchill’s old bedroom. During the war, the British Prime Minister used to stay at Ditchley – a short hop from his Blenheim Palace birthplace – whenever the moon was high as it was considered a safer spot that was less likely to be targeted by bombing raids, Fink tells me.

I’m relieved to see that the table in his classroom has already been laid by Joris, who is patiently learning how to serve a six-course dinner. Each setting is a complicated arrangement of four knives and forks, two spoons, six glasses and napkins folded into the shape of what looks like an elf’s shoe – “A bit of fun,” smiles Fink. He begins to explain what goes into each of



the glasses but by the time he's listed the sixth I've forgotten what he said about the first. Perhaps I'd like to pour the port, he suggests? I pick up the decanter and shift to stand behind a seated Joris. "To the right," Fink corrects. "Food is served from the left, drinks are poured from the right. Always. Don't forget to twist the decanter."

The correct way to lay a table is just one element of what Fink teaches. The syllabus also includes washing and valeting clothes, packing and unpacking suitcases, cleaning silver, maintaining rooms, mixing drinks and serving wine, not to mention all the other essential minutiae butlers must know. In the storeroom behind the classroom, he hands me a pair of ornate grape scissors, then a tray of berry spoons. I had no idea such things existed, which is precisely why he's showing them to me. "Can you imagine going to work at a house that's been there since the 1800s and being faced with something you don't recognise, but you can't ask what it is?"

Some of the etiquette he teaches is archaic – "We don't iron every page of the newspaper any more. I'd probably



Clockwise from left The corridors at Ditchley Park have seen many eminent butlers pass through; from shining shoes to polishing chandeliers, a butler's work is never done; a trained butler can earn up to £80,000 a year



just do the front and back.” – but students must be confident in the proper way of doing things, even if the households in which they work rarely require it.

Huge armies of staff are mainly a thing of the past and the modern-day butler is often required to be a valet, personal assistant and driver all in one. Hence the butler’s traditional sign-off: ‘Will that be all, Sir?’

“Anything more open-ended and nine times out of ten they will find something for you to do,” says Fink. “If you go to work for somebody, you must accept that your life revolves around them. If you can’t commit to that then I don’t think you should do the job.”

Fink knew he wanted to be a butler as a child, when he would watch Hollywood films where women in diamonds danced with men in tailcoats.

“I thought, ‘I want to be amongst this’. But we weren’t rich. My dad was a welder. I knew I’d have to find a different way in.” He joined the Royal Navy as a steward and swiftly rose through the ranks to become steward to the Commander in Chief, beginning his first butler job in 1960, earning ten shillings a week. These days, live-in butlers can expect to earn ‘around £30k’ while live-out staff, who don’t benefit from free board and lodging, can command up to £80,000 a year.

Most of Fink’s students hope to end up working for the super-rich in locations such as London, Switzerland or Monaco. Increasingly Fink also tutors those who employ their own staff, including the Crown Princess of Thailand, who arrived at Ditchley with an enormous entourage of 20 to learn ‘household management’.



“WE DON’T IRON EVERY PAGE OF THE NEWSPAPER ANYMORE, JUST THE FRONT AND THE BACK”

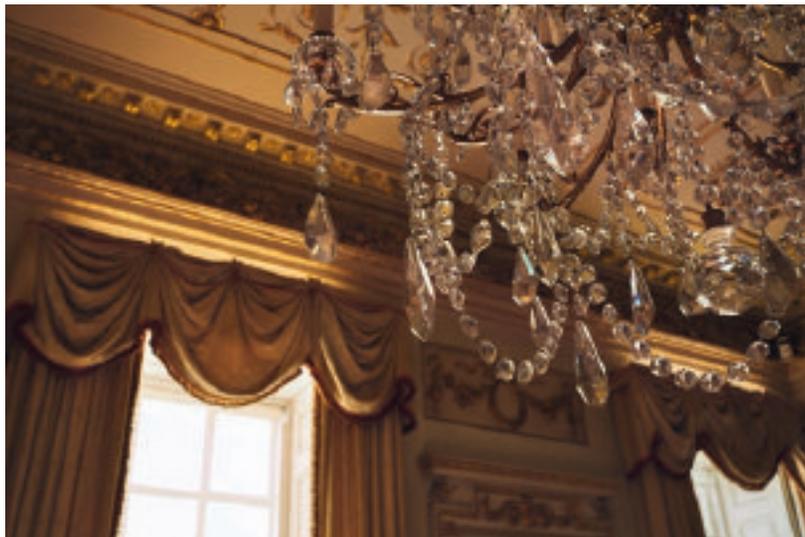
“One day I said, ‘Your Royal Highness, today I am going to teach you how to wash up properly. There are some aprons on the settee.’”

It’s an amusing image but Fink isn’t joking. Washing-up here is akin to a military operation, often taking several hours. Fink has been known to use up to 70 tea cloths to ensure a streak-free finish.

Excessive? Perhaps. But it’s the sort of attention to detail that has made him one of the most respected figures in his field.

“You couldn’t learn what Rick teaches from a textbook,” says Joris, who considers the £5,160 he paid for the two-week course to be a worthy investment. Such is Fink’s reputation, talented students can be assured of finding good positions quickly. Ditchley Park’s current head butler Riaan Ackerman is one recent graduate. “In this business Rick is a living legend,” he tells me.

The real-life Mr Carson? Fink isn’t settling for that. “I had a student who gave me a glass when he left,” he tells me. “He’d had it engraved with the words: ‘Who needs Mr Carson when there’s Mr Fink?’”



✂ *Fly to London*

📺 *Watch Downton Abbey*