

That will be all, James.

The profession of butler has changed significantly over the last 100 years. A butler is now much more of a creative personal assistant.

Butlers have to be called James – or at least, that is the cliché. The “Downton Abbey” series has provided a recent reminder of the image of the classic British butler: as the major-domo, he had the highest status of all the servants and practised his profession with great pride and honour. This role, which was firmly established in the 18th and 19th centuries in the old European and American mansions and in the colonies, gradually disappeared after the First and the Second World War, and butlers were only very rarely seen.

From mansion to hotel

With the advent of mass tourism in the '60s, the need arose for new hotels. Building these was no problem, but there were not enough experienced and well-trained staff available for all the hotels. This meant that hotel guests did not have a single point of contact, and had to turn to different people depending on their needs.

In the late '80s, the number of millionaires and billionaires increased once again, leading to a revival in the profession of butler in private homes. The booming Asian cities also made their own contribution – and from private mansions, the step into the hotel world soon followed. This development would be responsible for a renewed flowering of the profession. Luxury tourists don't mind spending money during their stay and have high standards, bringing significant change to the butler's role and job description: today, he is much more his guest's personal assistant.

London, cradle of the modern butler

Once again, the British were on the right track. The Lanesborough Hotel in London was the first hotel in Europe to introduce a butler service for all its guests, in 1990. Head Butler Robert Watson was responsible for building the butler department and developed many of the systems and standards, as well as the appropriate training. In 1998, Watson established his own company, The Guild of Professional English Butlers, and has since led projects all over the world in hotels, on cruise ships and on luxury yachts.

That is why, in 2014, the Dolder Grand asked him to train the staff in its newly established butler department. For Zurich's City Resort, this was one of several initiatives undertaken to realise its new mission statement, “Experiencing personality”. Matteo Previsdomini was entrusted with the project; he is head of the new division. Since June 2014, all suite, top-suite and residence guests at the Dolder Grand have been able to enjoy the on-call butler service. The butler gets in touch with the guests before they arrive to clarify their individual needs and make the best possible preparations for their stay.

DID YOU KNOW ...?

... that the word butler comes from the Anglo-Norman “buteler”, which is derived from the Old French “boteillier” (cellar master)?



“I don’t believe
a man can consider
himself fully
content until he has
done all he can to
be of service to
his employer.”

Butler James Stevens
in the film “Remains of the Day”



New understanding of service

“The butler experience has changed my understanding of service”, explained Matteo Previsdomini from the Canton of Grisons. “A good butler needs to anticipate what the guest wants, not wait until the request has been made.” Unpacking, ironing, cleaning shoes, arranging individual food and drink orders, organising transfers and reservations for events and much more – these are the standard services that suite guests can expect. “But that is not what makes us different. Each guest has individual needs, and these are our focus.” It is more a matter of stepping beyond

guests’ expectations – only then is the wow factor achieved. For example, a guest ordered a beautiful bouquet of flowers for his partner for their return to the suite. The butler team perfected the evening by creating a little more: the suite was carefully prepared with music, a fire in the fireplace, candlelight and a set table on the terrace under the stars – and with the bouquet as ordered. “The butler delighted the guest with something that he did not expect.” This is how to create good memories of the stay, and of “his” butler, who made it all possible. In this sense, butlers need a lot of creativity and imagination.







A butler's job description moves with the times and adapts to the changes in travel behaviour in various countries. While butlers have traditionally been male, women are now also found in these roles. As the Dolder Grand is home to many guests from the Gulf States, female butlers are also part of the team – because in this culture, men may not enter the suite of a female guest, explained Previsdomini.

From the Rolling Stones to the King of Sweden

The introduction of the butler service at the Dolder Grand has been a great success. “For guests who have never had the pleasure of a butler, it is an addi-

ditional service that provides much joy and convenience. We love to spoil our guests and try our hardest to surprise them again and again”, said Matteo Previsdomini. And what are the highlights of being a butler? “We have a wide range of guests. Of course, it is not always the Rolling Stones or the King and Queen of Sweden ... but it can be!” he explained with a grin. In closing, he added: “We are there to make the guests happy. This is a rewarding task and can be very satisfying.”

Sources: The Guild of Professional English Butlers, The International Butler Academy, Wikipedia

Questions for Robert Watson

The Guild of Professional English Butlers

Are there any differences in being a butler in an Asian, Middle East or European hotel? Do you train butlers differently?

Butler service is in essence a personalised service, so we train butlers to fit the culture, environment and style of the hotel. For example:

- In Bali, the butlers will slip off their shoes before entering a guest's room, as they do in their own homes.
- In Saudi Arabia, a male butler cannot enter a room where a female guest is on her own, as it is against Koranic law for a man and a woman who are not related by blood to be in a confined space.
- In a London hotel, the guests expect their butler to be more like Jeeves or a character from “Downton Abbey”, to reflect the English butler style.
- Clearly, a guest in a resort hotel in the Seychelles has a different service need to the businessman in a European city centre hotel, and the butler service has to be adapted to suit both requirements.

What challenges do you see in the coming years?

- As more and more hotels implement a butler service, the danger is that many hotels will not invest in training for the butlers, and instead will put a waiter in a nice jacket and call him or her “the butler”. However, without the training and understanding of the role, they will provide a very second-rate service which will not satisfy the guests' expectations.
- In the future there will be 100 million Chinese tourists visiting many countries around the world. We will all have to learn how to service that huge market, which is very different to what most of us are used to.
- Although we will have to embrace new technology as service-focused personnel, we must ensure that we do not lose our basic role, which is that of one person serving another. The machine or micro-chip cannot do this.
- Great service will always be the differentiator between one hotel and another. Those hotels that concentrate and develop their service levels will always be in demand.



