

*Jeeves: I read a most stimulating article in The New York Times, Sir, the author of which asserts that moustaches are a most notorious cause for divorces in many parts of the country.*

*Bertie: Jeeves, I don't care if it's the cause of staggers in race horses. I will not have you editing my upper lip.*

*Jeeves: As you wish, Sir.*

## *Simon the Butler*

*writer and photographer Fiona Stocker*

Imagine having a member of staff within your household dedicated to keeping the wine cellar stocked, the laundry fresh, vehicles fuelled and faux pas in etiquette and appearance to a minimum. One could breeze through life with considerably more ease.

Not many are in a position to avail themselves of such an individual these days, but there are those who can and do by engaging the services of Simon McInerney, Tasmania's only freelance butler and one of an elite few in Australia.

Contrary to expectations, the role of butler is not entirely a fiction from a PG Wodehouse novel, nor is it condemned to history. Butlers are alive and well and keeping up with modern times in private houses across the world. This is made clear to me as McInerney and I take tea, from Royal Albert china, in his Launceston home.

The old style of butler service continues in aristocratic houses such as Highclere Castle

in Hampshire, England, the country seat of a 2,000-hectare estate where Simon and his wife Robyn worked early in their careers.

Highclere is owned by the eighth Earl and Countess of Carnarvon and is a place with house-keeping customs set in time-worn stone.

An example was the custom of the long-serving gamekeeper arriving at the back of the house at the end of a hunting day and receiving a cup of tea handed through a window. Maintaining these old English traditions was something of a learning curve for a young Australian.

Oddly, such customs have enabled the castle to survive into the modern era, being one of the features for which the estate is offered for hire, for corporate events and weddings. With so many processes enshrined in ritual, it was difficult to get a Highclere wedding wrong.

Furniture and family possessions were customarily removed to allow space for wedding



*Simon McInerney serves on the board of Harvest Launceston community market*

furniture, and when returned, had to be replaced with pinpoint accuracy to their usual spot. This is where staff who were retained at the castle for decades came into their own, with plenty of tutting at the antipodean newcomers' mistakes.

The famed butler's discretion was tested to the maximum by such modern events. In the run-up to one high-profile wedding at Highclere, chequebook journalists offered McInerney a deposit on a house back in Australia for a tell-all story. Staff who give in to such temptation never work in the industry again, he told me, with Jeeves-like inscrutability.

Highclere was later used as the location shoot for television series *Downton Abbey* and whilst the plot didn't hold much appeal, McInerney was briefly entertained by the opportunity to revisit

the interiors, recalling how much the furniture was worth and hoping that the television crew had taken care when moving it.

When Simon and Robyn McInerney moved on to a weekend residence in Oxfordshire owned by a high-profile couple in the entertainment industry, a new and completely different interpretation of the butler's role was required. For this household, the pair established the conventions of service, and the role was broader – not merely serving dinner but managing diet preferences, turning a discrete deaf ear to media-worthy stories that cropped up in conversations, figuring out why the email wasn't working and configuring a state-of-the-art sound system.

The need for discretion and ability to be an easy presence remains a constant, says McInerney

said. It's important to know how to maintain a human face and a personality, but not join in the conversation, when to leave a room and when to stay in it. There is no space for awkwardness, whether the master or mistress of the house is in their underwear or full business attire.

Now ensconced back in his native Tasmania, Simon the Butler sees ample opportunity within the luxury travel sector, providing a seamless travel experience for wealthy individuals who wish to have a below-the-radar visit, and for whom a helicopter is the transport of choice. The butler is the obvious choice of personnel to liaise with resorts such as Saffire, and travel plans are smoothed at every turn in the road, or air space.

Tasmania's gourmet food and beverage sector lends itself to this heightened experience and McInerney keeps a foot firmly in relevant doors. On Mondays he hosts at Delamere Vineyard's cellar door in Pipers River, keeping up with the vintages. Often he'll meet with visiting mainland sommeliers as they select wines for multi-hatted restaurant lists. McInerney holds

his own in such conversations, having worked in European households where the cellars were extraordinary, and where tasting a wine before it went to table was an essential part of the job. He is on the board of award-winning Harvest Launceston farmers' market alongside the region's premier restaurant owners and artisan food producers. And he presents exquisite morning and afternoon teas for private parties around northern Tasmania.

Finally, he has what is perhaps Australia's most exclusive fly-in, fly-out role, that of butler-on-call at the country residences of Melbourne- and Sydney-based clients. To them, Tasmania is a rich seam of desirable experiences and Simon takes pleasure in exhorting them to visit, this being the only true way to experience the island state's produce and pleasures.

The butler has turned ambassador. 

*Simon McInerney can be contacted through his web site at [simonmcinerney.com](http://simonmcinerney.com).*