



**Domestic life comes out of the closet in Radio 4 series.**

**Interview with Professor Amanda Vickery**

**Duration:**           **0:16:46**

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Introducer:           Welcome, this is a Podcast from the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Interviewer:         I'm speaking to Professor Amanda Vickery, Reader in History at Royal Holloway, University of London. Amanda, thanks very much for the opportunity to talk to you today. I suppose we're brought up with the idea of history as being a succession of public shared events, that happens with a bit of a fanfare, involving important people, with big consequences. One thinks of 1066, 1415, 1939 and so on.

Your research has a very different starting point doesn't it?

Professor Vickery: I began by asking what are people's most intimate thoughts and feelings, dreams and dilemmas, about life at home. It's such a fundamental feature of who we are really at our homes. If you think about home sweet home or the very word home, home grown, home cooked, they are promises of satisfaction. We can all I think identify with Mole longing for his 'Dulce Domum' in

'Wind In The Willows'. So I was trying to get at the heart of that, that dream, that fantasy, you know what does home really mean and how do people experience it in the past?

What I would say is it's not so straight forward to discover, as you might imagine. I think the history of home is so fundamental, it's so obvious to people that it goes without saying. So in their diaries – when people are writing diaries and letters, they are always commenting on events and dramas, they very rarely comment on routines. So the history of home hides in plain sight. You have to use some ingenuity to expose those things, which people in the past took for granted.

Interviewer: Just talk us through some examples of what you've discovered and how you've discovered? How did you do that, sort of reading between the lines as it were?

Professor Vickery: What I realised is that its crisis really that inspires people to talk about home. So, well, classic examples might be burglary, arson or bankruptcy, moments when you know everything about the home is imperil or under threat and then people lay out the way they feel invaded, what they've lost, what that loss means to them, how hard it's going to be to kind of recreate things.

But in terms of the internal dynamics of home, one kind of diary that I found particularly helpful were the diaries of widowers, because widowers have to do all the things which when you're married a wife does for you and they experience that loss, you know the loss not only of their lover and wife, but also the mother of their children and their housekeeper and so widower's

diaries are absolutely prolix on the difficulties of running a house.

Whereas if you look at the diaries of married men, they say nothing on the topic, absolutely nothing. So it was comparing the two I began to expose some of the sort of shoring up that goes on behind closed doors.

Interviewer: Your research covers hundreds of years as well, there must be enormous changes over those hundreds of years?

Professor Vickery: At the heart of research that I've done, is the material for my book, which is called 'Behind Closed Doors', which is published by Yale. But the radio series is much broader than the book, the book covers what historians call 'The Long 18<sup>th</sup> Century'. The radio series covers the period from the Tudor mansion to the 1960's bedsit.

So for the earlier period, for the 17<sup>th</sup>, really the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, I talk about some of the deep structures of home, fundamental ideas of privacy, refuge, the home is a place of prayer, the home is a place of ritual and hierarchy. Then moving into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, I talk about the home as a public stage and a place of taste and then as enlightenment ideas are becoming current, the home as a stage for the performance of enlightened marriage.

So when the ideas of the Scottish enlightenment are circling, men – for the modern up to date well read man, masculinity is no longer best expressed through oppressing your wife, but is by having her as a kind of honourable partner and hostess and

giving her her due in the drawing room and so she's a trophy really and that's something which enforces a man's kind of modern up to date masculinity, to have a very polished, well behaved, well educated wife.

Then moving into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I was trying to think of ways to capture the Victorian home in a new way, in a way that would be kind of arresting for listeners, because I think everybody has a vision of the Victorian home and it feels quite well known territory. So one of the programmes that I'm most satisfied with is on the garden indoors and how the Victorians – even though their houses were incredibly polluted, gas lit coal fires, they had this absolute obsession with bringing greenery indoors.

So I mean one way to do that is to have the old cast iron plant, the Aspidistra, which can survive anything. That's why the indestructible Aspidistra becomes such a symbol of working class respectability, it will survive. But the great thing that the Victorians discover is the wardian case, the sealed glass case in which plants can – they re-absorb the moisture they expire. So therefore seeds can germinate within them, so they grow, they have ferns inside them, it's absolute fern mania and the fern symbolises those sort of – the romance of nature for the Victorians.

Also another Victorian obsession is the aquarium and again the fernery and the aquarium are about creating a kind of moral home, because there's lots of very active churchmen who support aquarium, because it's a way of celebrating the variety and wonder of God's creation.

So the fernery and the aquarium were a way for me to get at some of these things, which we think we know about the Victorians, but in an entirely novel way and then we move onto

the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the rise of the suburb, the attack on the suburbs, the imperial bungalow.

I'm very happy with the programme we made on the empire abroad and the British in India, or the Anglo Indians as they call themselves and the great contract, their homes, there the bungalow made with these cluttered woe me Victorian houses, but particularly how they just couldn't – were amazed by a house really where there was no defensible threshold and so obviously they had visceral fears of a treacherous, possibly mutinous, possibly murderous population.

But they were also incredibly scared of nature as well, because they think they just feel the reptiles are coming in all the time and so they don't knock at the door, they don't respect the threshold of the Englishman's castle, and then finally we end with the flat and the bedsit and the English continuing dislike of really kind of flats and lodgings and the continued desire for a separate, probably suburban home of one's own.

Interviewer: It all sounds fascinating and we do have an insatiable curiosity don't we about what happens behind other people's closed doors and that puts history, in particular the kind of history that we're talking about, very much in the mainstream doesn't it? And what does that feel like, to have your research that you've been doing for many years, right there in the mainstream through this series and through the book?

Professor Vickery: It's a huge pleasure actually for me to communicate my work to an intelligent thinking audience, way beyond the academy. I mean that's one of the joys of publishing a successful book, but

also doing a radio series, not least because they are dramatised, so, you know, I got to work with very talented producers, Elizabeth Burke and we talked. We met once a week to work over the scripts and so I was a transfer fellow to Loftus Productions, where she works and so I worked intensively in the studios with them, so I was able to see how they – well not only how you develop and edit a script, something which might be a bank and academic lecture and becomes something altogether different, as a spoken script.

Then also how you coach the actors to get the right sort of performance. The wonderful Deborah Findley, who I loved in Cranford, actually voices a lot of the women. So for me these voices that I've heard in my head, some of them for you know 15, 20 years, now it's uncanny really to hear them being broadcast.

So because sometimes you know when you do all this researching on your own and you think did I make it up, did I dream it? No, there it is, it's all like a play and then we quilted it together, I watched them edit and so I learnt a lot. It's a great joy to learn a new skill and I feel that I have, you know I've learnt ways to kind of adapt what I've got into another medium.

Another huge pleasure of making the series for me was unexpectedly the power of music and song to develop arguments. So it's not – some would think, yes I'm very aware, I'm sort of quite visually literate, so I'm aware of the power of images to elaborate and develop an argument and how they can you know bring further nuance and – but also you know just new ideas and new ways of thinking about a subject, or turn a subject on its head and it had never occurred to me that music could do the same sort of thing.

So for instance, one of the programmes is on the closet and closets are little rooms off main bedrooms, which get established in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the houses of the middling and the Gentry and you're supposed to withdraw into these closets, so that as an active Christian, you are supposed to go in there twice a day and do your closet duties.

Eventually of course that's where the water closet will be, but it's this little private place and the closet duties are where you sort of go – you do all this kind of formal ritual praying and I had no idea until the music research told me that Barts Cello Suite are a form of sort of closet discipline. So that the good instrumentalist would play those repetitive Suites, because they are about really exercising your prayers, so it's a kind of active devotion and so we use the music throughout and we don't trumpet it, but there it is, the music, it's the perfect expression of the argument that I'm trying to make about prayer.

Interviewer: The Radio 4 series was made possible by an AHRC Knowledge Transfer Fellowship, which brings academics together with non-academics. It sounds like you've got an awful lot out of working in such a structured way with the sort of disciplines you're talking about.

They must have gained an awful lot from you as well. There is the power of research to really enter the mainstream, to transform people's understandings of a lot of things.

Professor Vickery: I think Loftus would say that through me and through developing the relationship with me, they've got this kind of bridge to the universities. So you know not just me, but my

own institution and so myself and Elizabeth Burke, we're going back to Royal Holloway and we're going to give seminars on the new MA that Royal Holloway has in public history, so that actually that feeds back to the under-graduates and MA students as well. So that people have a sense of how you can manipulate this kind of material.

I think for Loftus, it was the excitement of having someone who could interpret for them a field which was absolutely mysterious, and so that was rather joyous and so our relationships are very good now and in fact we put in more bids now for more radio series to do. We have to wait and see whether we get them commissioned by Radio 4.

Interviewer: What would you say to other academics who may be a little wary about engaging with – outside of their academic comfort zone if you like?

Professor Vickery: I think the key point is it's in the quality of the relationship that you have with the other institution. I knew that Loftus Productions was a classy and prestigious production company and Elizabeth Burke, who is the producer that I worked closely with, I had known her for 10 years, so we didn't just sort of invent the collaboration, because there was a grant and I think that's the important thing.

I think you have to – it has to be a really meaningful relationship, where both sides feel they are going to get something from it and it's out of that, that you know you get a professional relationship of trust and there's a creative tension there between my desire to be academically correct and

Elizabeth's desire for intelligent listening, for anybody in an afternoon and somewhere between the two is how you get the radio programme which is attractive, atmospheric, but also is full of new research and with a new interpretation to bring to bear.

Interviewer: In the article you've written for the AHRC's magazine 'Podium', you talk about your involvement with the AHRC, which pre-dates the Knowledge Transfer Fellowship. Just talk us through some of that involvement?

Professor Vickery: For five years I was the Associate Director of a centre funded by the AHRC, Centre for the Study of the Domestic Interior and I think that the experience of being involved in that, which was an inter-disciplinary centre, which ran many many inter-disciplinary conferences, 17 international conferences, organised an exhibition, organised an online database of representations of the domestic interior, which you know is still there online free to use.

That experience really of working with art historians, with geographers, with anthropologists, with design historians, I think it taught me to have some respect for other disciplines and that they use different sorts of languages and vocabularies and how hard a collaboration is to be frank, but also how fruitful it can be if it's really meaningful and if everybody cares about it enough, which I felt that we all did and I think having that experience for five years and hearing so much about the home and the interior in lots of different countries and over the *longue durée* historically, I think that gave me the confidence to think

"Yes, I can present a radio series on 400 years of domesticity. I don't just have to do 25 years, I have got the expertise to sell it".

Interviewer: Well all the very best for the series, we're very much looking forward to following it and thanks very much for talking to us today, thank you.

Professor Vickery: Thank you, it was my pleasure.

Introducer: This podcast is accompanied by an article in the AHRC's latest Podium magazine. It can be accessed via the publication section on the AHRC website.

That was a podcast from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. For further information please go to [www.ahrc.ac.uk](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk). Thank you for listening.

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