

Rachel Gurney

(LUBBOCK)

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Actress who played the elegant Lady Marjorie Bellamy in the popular television drama *Upstairs Downstairs*



Gurney: 'I would rather have played one of the servants'

RACHEL GURNEY, the actress who has died aged 81, was best known for her role as the elegant Lady Marjorie Bellamy in *Upstairs Downstairs*, the popular television series of the 1970s which chronicled the lives of the upper-class Bellamy family and their servants during the first 30 years of the last century.

For four years television audiences were held spellbound by events that took the Bellamys and their domestic staff from Edwardian England in 1903 through to the Great War, the political upheavals of the 1920s and the stock-market crash of 1930.

The series was set in a grand London house, 165 Eaton Place. The "upstairs" inhabitants were Lady Marjorie, whose father happened to be the Prime Minister, and her rather weak but good-natured husband, Richard Bellamy (David Langton), an ambitious politician who relied heavily on his wife's wealth and connections. They had two children, James (Simon Williams) and Elizabeth (Nicola Pagett) who were the cause of much gossip among those who lived "downstairs". Led by the exceedingly proper Scottish butler, Hudson (Gordon Jackson) and the formidable cook, Mrs Bridges, the staff included parlour-maids Rose (played by Jean Marsh, who devised the series) and Sarah (Pauline Collins) and the lady's maid, Roberts (Patsy Smart).

Upstairs Downstairs became something of an institution and viewers lapped up the social niceties and sexual scandals of the Edwardian household, never questioning why it was that below stairs six able-bodied people would regularly reach a state of near-hysteria at the prospect of serving lunch for two unexpectedly. Rachel Gurney was not,

however, entirely enamoured of her character. "I would have much rather played one of the servants," she said, "they are much nicer people."

After the success of the first two series of *Upstairs Downstairs*, she decided to move on to other work. The show's writers, who prided themselves on their inclusion of historical events in the narrative, duly wrote her out, and Lady Marjorie left for America on the maiden voyage of the *Titanic*.

Rachel Gurney Lubbock was born on March 5 1920 and grew up with her brother at Eton, where her father was Samuel Gurney Lubbock, a housemaster at the school. Her mother was a Irene Scharrer, a concert pianist, and Rachel's childhood was spent in a house with 42 boys and numerous visiting artists and musicians. ("Not a bad life," she later recalled.)

After school Rachel Gurney trained for the stage at the Webber-Douglas Drama School and soon after the war she became a regular on the West End stage. Throughout the 1950s she appeared in numerous productions including *Carrington VC* (1953), a play set during a court martial in which she starred opposite Alec Clunes, *The Bombshell* (1954), and *The Merchant of Venice* (1955) in which she played Portia to Michael Hordern's Shylock. In 1959 she replaced Celia Johnson in *The Grass Is Greener* at the St Martin's Theatre and in 1965 she was a "splendidly suffering" Hermione in *A Winter's Tale* with John Gielgud as Leontes and Peggy Ashcroft as Paulina.

Her West End successes continued with *An Ideal Husband* (1965) at the Piccadilly Theatre and in 1969 she toured with Shaw's *On the Rocks* along-

side David Tomlinson, Robert Fleming and Jack Hulbert.

Rachel Gurney also made numerous appearances in television dramas throughout the 1950s and 1960s including the original BBC2 production of Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1969) in which she played Lady Carbury.

After *Upstairs Downstairs* her television work continued alongside her successful stage career, which included roles in J B Priestley's *Dangerous Corner* (1974) with Gerald Flood and Barbara Jefford, and *Richard III* (1989) in which she played the mother of Richard (Derek Jacobi). Rachel Gurney was always popular with her fellow actors and actresses, although she was modest almost to a fault. When a producer offered her a part she was inclined to shake her head sadly and murmur: "I'm not really right for it, you know. Why don't you get Faith Brook?" Indeed she had to be persuaded to take the part of Lady Marjorie.

Upstairs Downstairs was watched by 300 million viewers in 50 countries and achieved great success in America, where it was one of the most popular programmes in the *Masterpiece Theatre* strand on the American Public Broadcasting Service and won five Emmy Awards. For the rest of her life Rachel Gurney continued to receive fan mail from all over the world. She admitted that the role of Lady Marjorie had led to a certain amount of typecasting but was happy to have been part of television history. "*Upstairs Downstairs*," she said recently, "changed the lives of so many people".

She was married to the novelist Denis Rhodes (the marriage was dissolved in 1950). She is survived by her daughter.