

SNOB OR YOBB?

Are you a chav? Or are you posh? Or somewhere in between? Does snobbery still exist? Or are we inverse snobs? REAL spoke to five women whose experiences show that class is still a part of all our lives...

PICTURE POSED BY MODEL

FEATURE Olivia Gordon PHOTOGRAPHS Nikki Crisp/Antony Thompson/Big Pictures/Rex Features/BBC/ITV/Tim Flach

An Oxford student was stabbed for being a 'rich bitch' this year, while it-girl Lady Isabella Hervey has reportedly started dropping her Ts in an attempt to seem more chavish. It's not acceptable, it seems, to be posh these days.

At the same time, there has been a storm of concern about the 'chav underclass' with its antisocial behaviour and downmarket fashions. Two years ago, most people didn't know what a chav was. Now it has even made it into the Collins English Dictionary as 'a young working-class person who dresses in casual sports clothes'.

Whether we are laughing at Coleen McLaughlin's nouveau-riche handbags or Hooray-Henriettas like Tamara Beckwith, the fact remains that it's a bit of an insult to label someone either common or posh. Few people admit to being chavish or upper class – most of us aspire to be somewhere 'classless' in between – but as soon as we meet someone else, we silently recognise their class. Our social background exudes from our accents, clothes, hair styles, the TV we watch and the books we read. White stilettos and a Burberry cap put you at the bottom of the social pile; a Barbour jacket and wellies at the top. A few questions – what do you

do?, where are you from?, what school/university did you go to?, what did your parents do? – and we are revealed as privileged or working class. Being the right or wrong class can make the difference between being idolised or victimised; getting the job or failing the interview. Social class is a national obsession and shapes all our lives.

And however much we all believe that being working class is fashionable, and that, with hard work, someone can go from the bottom of the social scale to the top in today's egalitarian society, the gap between rich and poor is as wide as ever. Shocking new statistics from a study by the London School of Economics on behalf of educational charity the Sutton Trust reveal that Britain has one of the worst rates of social mobility in the developed world. Far from being a land of widening inclusion and opportunity for all, the chance for someone from a deprived background to move into a top income bracket – as a doctor or lawyer, for example – is even lower in Britain today than it was 30 years ago.

Sir Peter Lampl, Chairman of the Sutton Trust, explains that 'educational apartheid' is a major reason for what he calls this 'class effect'. 'We used to have an academically selective education system,

but now rich people send their kids to private schools, the next level can afford to live in the catchment area for the best state schools, and the poor kids end up in the rotten state schools. And although there has been a big expansion in university education, it has gone disproportionately to the "haves" rather than the "have-nots".'

The Sutton Trust runs access programs for disadvantaged children, helping them to gain the confidence to do well at school, apply to Oxbridge and work in the top professions. Sir Peter believes parents need to be educated as much as children, because disadvantage starts before birth and poor children are 'already out of the picture' by the time they begin school. 'You've got to support parents and kids right from the beginning to help the problem of antisocial behaviour.'

He adds that privileged schools train pupils to be the polished, articulate candidates that professional employers accept, while even if a student from a poor school leaves with good grades, they are often let down by never having learnt these 'soft skills'. Whether we like it or not, our class – both our income background and the way we behave – affects not only how others see us, but how successful we can be in life.

I GREW UP IN SQUATS AND WAS CALLED A CHAV – AND I'M PROUD OF IT

Jessica Alliston, 21, from Oxfordshire, explains how working-class values have made her strong

I am proud to come from a council house background. But I used to be ashamed of it. I have always lived in affluent areas and used to feel others looked down on me.

I had a troubled childhood. My mum was 17 when I was born and brought me up on her own with my three younger sisters. We moved around a lot and lived in unpleasant squats when I was little. Mum wasn't the best mother in the world – she was a drug addict, though she has now recovered – and I really resented it.

I was seven when we settled for the first time. We lived in a small, messy council house outside a village with £400,000 privately-owned homes. I felt separate, and I hated it. What annoyed me were the material differences between my school friends and myself. My best friend came from a 'normal' family – parents still in love, with good jobs, a nice house, two company cars and two holidays a year. I just wanted the status she had. I felt skanky. I was ashamed of Mum, the car, the house.

At secondary school things got even worse. At 15 I started going out with a boy whose mum was in prison. She had used to take him out robbing houses when he was seven. I didn't get on with most of the

kids in my year. I was known as Rude Girl, or Chav, and everyone was scared of me because of the way I spoke. I was told, 'if you would learn to speak differently, you would get treated differently!' Yet no one made any effort to talk to me. I walked around with a chip on my shoulder.

I always wanted more. I came out of school with good exam results and was accepted into university, but chose not to go. It wasn't until I went travelling at 19 – to China to teach English – that I found a place where social class wasn't an issue, where no one cared what school I had been to and what my parents did.

I find it amazing that people in government, who have had the protection of nice schools and houses, can say that any child can do what they want. If you live on an estate and you come from nothing, and every single person around you comes from nothing and has no money, and you go to a failing school, and your parents tell you not to worry about your exams – it's really difficult.

I moved into my own home at 20. My friends still have the comfort blanket of living at home rent-free with their parents but I have had to work hard – I started working at 12, cleaning locally.

“EVERYONE WAS SCARED OF ME BECAUSE OF THE WAY I SPOKE”



A lot of my friends' parents have high-powered jobs, but I've got more than any of them. Most people who have come from nothing are loyal to one another: it's one for all, all for one. People from an estate have estate values: not robbing from their own and not grassing someone up to the police unless they have to. People from an upper or middle-class background don't have that loyalty. And you wouldn't get a more loyal person than me. Going through so much so young made me the strong person I am today. ➤



I CAN MAKE A LADY OF ANY YOB

Former principal of the Lucie Clayton finishing school, renowned etiquette teacher Jean Broke-Smith, 58, says being a lady is as important today as ever

I teach etiquette: deportment, grooming, and taste. I wasn't a debutante myself, but went to an academic private school. I went on to become principal of the Lucie Clayton finishing school and remained there for many years. I can't tell you how many well-known, titled people I've taught – people like Lady Isabella Hervey and her sister Victoria, and some of Prince William's girlfriends, who are debs.

I think manners have gone downhill and people have lost respect. I was going through the revolving doors recently at The Savoy and a smart man just behind me rushed through the door, nearly knocking me over. I followed him and said – which I never usually do to a stranger – 'Did you not see I was standing there?' He said, 'I was in a hurry.' I said, 'I'm also in a hurry. Have you heard of manners?' People today think it's cool to be a chav. There seems to be more inverse snobbery and dumbing down, which is sad.

But increasingly, people are getting fed up with antisocial behaviour. There's an extraordinary resurgence of interest in etiquette. I work seven days a week finishing girls. One day I'm teaching debs and ladies at the Sloane Club, the next day ladettes.

What surprises me is girls from a poorer background now coming to me. It's nice that I'm helping people better themselves – putting them into skirts and teaching them how to use a knife and fork. It's *My Fair Lady* all over again. I say it is possible to try to change class if someone wants to be changed – class is behaviour rather than money.

“PEOPLE TODAY THINK IT'S COOL TO BE A CHAV. THERE SEEMS TO BE MORE INVERSE SNOBBERY AND DUMBING DOWN, WHICH IS SAD

Unfortunately, people tend to be ruder further down the social ladder, because you learn from school, your background and your family. If you see a child with bad manners, if you look at their parents, you see where the bad manners have come from.

For the TV show *Ladette to Lady*, I taught ladettes everything girls used to learn in a finishing school. Their language and heavy drinking were shocking, and they all tended to talk at the same time. I got them into skirts and shoes – most of them didn't possess a skirt, which I thought was very funny.

Once upon a time, there were the upper and lower classes. Things have changed. 30 years ago, debs were snooty. They would look me up and down and ask, 'Who's she?' They assumed I must be all right because I had a double-barrelled name. But nowadays they respect me, and chat to me as if I'm a

normal human being. In the past, all the girls I taught had a title – but now some don't want others to know that they're debutantes, or even that they went to public school. In my generation, part of a well-heeled girl's life was not the gap year, but finishing school. No finishing schools exist anymore in Britain. Public schools don't even teach deportment anymore, which disappoints me.

■ Jean Broke-Smith recently appeared in the ITV1 series *Ladette to Lady*. She is available for one-on-one, school and corporate etiquette coaching. Call 020 7221 5815.

PEOPLE ACCUSE ME OF SNEERING AT THE UNDERCLASS – BUT THEY'RE WRONG

Working-class Mia Wallace, 30, explains what led her to create the website Chavscum

'Mia Wallace' is a pseudonym. My husband, 'Clint', and I get a lot of violent threats from people because of our website, www.chavscum.co.uk (a website which showcases pictures and stories about chavs, sent in by the public). We find chavs an irritant, but a funny one. Our website glibly describes chavs as 'Britain's peasant underclass', and this has been used as a stick to beat us with. We get 100 emails a day and almost all take the site the wrong way. They either take offence and say, 'Aren't you horrible,' or, at the other extreme, suggest, 'All chavs should be exterminated' – which I find frightening. We have kept our identities private so we only come into contact with these people by email. We fear somebody could find out our address. No one from our daily life, and none of our friends know we run the site.

A typical chav wears big earrings and a lot of labels, and has an attitude of not caring about others. I had always seen chavs going around on the streets and my kids mix with chavs at their school, where there is

antisocial behaviour like happy slapping. Sometimes we found chavs threatening, sometimes hilarious. One day about 18 months ago, I was walking down the road and there was this gang of chavs in a souped-up car all hanging out of the window making a rapper signal with their fingers, shouting, 'Woo woo woo!'

My husband and I thought they were awful and we imagined that others might feel the same, so we started Chavscum. Sometimes the best way to deal with something is to laugh at it, and we see our site as a lighthearted giggle. We didn't realise how it would take off. Chav was named the buzzword of 2004 and since then everything's gone crazy. Various people saw the site and wanted a book out, so we wrote one (*Chav! A user's guide to Britain's new ruling class*, Transworld, £9.99).

I actually live in a pretty chavvy community. I know people who are chavs, but wouldn't class them as friends. A lot of the observations that we've made on chavs come from me being an ordinary mum and Clint running a mobile phone shop. Chavs just love their mobiles!

The chavs are actually the new ruling class of Britain. Hopefully people will see that and be afraid. If you compare how many chavs there are now to how many there were five years ago, the number is huge – and I think it's growing.

A lot of people who post messages on our forum can be quite right-wing, but people who criticise us as snobs misunderstand us. Being a chav is a choice. It's not about how much money you have – it's about having less respect for the rest of society. A lot of chavs have a working-class rather than an upper-class background, but there are also many rich chavs out there like the Beckhams – the chavviest couple I know.

It really gets to me when people accuse me of sneering at the working classes. I'm about as working class as it gets. I grew up on a council estate in London's east end. I think chav is a class of its own. Maybe originally it did come from the working class, but I certainly don't think it's working class at all now. The working classes have always had aspirations – chavs don't.

THEY CHASED ME AND SPAT AT ME FOR BEING POSH

Sophia*, 19, from Berkshire, explains how she was victimised because of her background

I had a very middle-class upbringing. My parents always encouraged me to do well in everything I tried to achieve. I was a happy, well-rounded child and we were always going on holidays.

In my first year at school, my best friend moved to a dodgy area. Her new friends took a dislike to me because they perceived me as 'posh'. These girls did everything they could to stop people from speaking to me. They trailed me between lessons, shouting threats to beat me up. Prank telephone calls were made to my home phone during the night and I was sent abusive text messages: 'Don't come into town on Saturday or you'll regret it'. They called me 'Princess Caviar' because they said I spoke like royalty.

One day the gang decided to follow me all the way home, shouting names as they marched behind me. Just before I got to my house they ran up to me and started spitting on me. There was nothing I could do about it. When I ran into my house, they fled.

I was constantly upset. I wouldn't eat and cried myself to sleep as I was so worried about what would happen the next day. My parents wanted to contact the school and tell them about the incidents, but I begged them not

to say anything in case the situation got worse.

One day, while the girls were tormenting me in class, I reached boiling point. I decided that I had had enough and told them to leave me alone – the worst move that I could have made, because they were just waiting for any excuse to fight. The ringleader punched me in the face, then began slapping me. I desperately wanted to stop the whole thing, but the other girls surrounding me were aggressive and I felt helpless because there were so many of them. I did fight back because they'd been niggling at me for so long that I needed to get it all out of my system. I felt terrible about fighting, mainly because it's not something that my parents would encourage. Soon we were having a full-on fight – kicking, punching, slapping and biting each other. We were both badly bruised.

I eventually moved to another school, left with good grades, and I am very happy now. But I have learnt that society believes that people must fit into some kind of class. Without really knowing a person, how can you make that kind of judgement?

*Name has been changed

WHY SHOULDN'T I BE A POSH CLEANER?

Upper-crust Sally, 43, from Gloucestershire, says she enjoys her work as a cleaning lady and defies anybody who looks down on her profession



I went to a girls' boarding school. Until I got married and had children, I was a secretary and also had a job in an art gallery. My husband works in IT, and our two children are at boarding school with fees of £35,000 a year. We live in a beautiful Cotswold farmhouse and winter in Jamaica.

As a Mrs Mopp, I do one day of cleaning a week. I charge £10 per hour, and a friend of mine charges £12 – that's more expensive than most cleaners. In some cases people will pay a premium for a cleaner from a middle-class background. It doesn't mean

you are more trustworthy, but clients feel they can relate to you more.

I clean houses for a bit of extra cash while the children are away at school and when I am bored – it certainly helps but it doesn't pay the big bills.

As an upper-middle class cleaner, I do get some really funny reactions. Some disdainfully say, 'Oh...that's awful!' or, 'What on earth do you want to do that for?' Others say, 'Good for you – you're getting off your butt and doing something.'

My father, having paid for my expensive education, was a little surprised when I first told him what I was doing, but he then said it was good I was contributing rather than twiddling my thumbs at home or going shopping. I think my children are quite proud of me in a funny way.

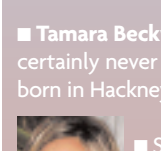
I'm not worried about any social stigma attached to being a cleaner – if someone is snobbish about it, I don't want to know them. I don't see why cleaning is such a terrible thing for someone upper-middle class to do. Times have changed – my grandmother would never have considered cleaning her own house and would have been horrified to know that I am a cleaner. But in this day and age there are very few people who have never used a vacuum cleaner or a duster.

Most of our clients are posh. One woman seemed to feel awkward with me – perhaps she thought I was looking down my nose at her. I don't work with a servile attitude. But on the whole people are terribly nice and treat me with courtesy, which is how you should treat anyone of any class.

TOFFS



■ **Outspoken Princess Michael of Kent** reportedly said life in Britain is boring now fox-hunting is banned, called Fergie common, and was accused of being racist towards a table of African-American diners in New York when she allegedly mentioned 'going back to the colonies'.



■ **Tamara Beckwith:** 'I would certainly never pretend I was born in Hackney.'



■ **Socialite Lady Victoria Hervey** was branded a snob by fellow it-girl Tara Palmer-Tomkinson.



■ **Victoria Aitken,** daughter of disgraced Tory MP Jonathan Aitken, found cringe-making fame when she attempted to launch a career as a rapper: 'I'm like Jenny from the block – only the opposite!'

TOFFS AND CHAVS: icons of our time



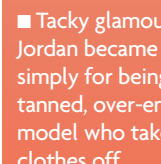
■ The original baseball-capped chav icon Victoria Beckham proved she was definitely not posh when she named her second son Romeo.



■ **Coleen McLoughlin** has been dubbed 'the queen of chav style', though more recently she has been seen made-over in Chloé.



■ **Chavtastic Little Britain star Vicky Pollard:** 'Yeah but no but...'



■ **Tacky glamour girl Jordan** became famous simply for being a fake-tanned, over-endowed model who takes her clothes off.

CHAVS