

Separate door for the poor? Welcome to classless Britain

'Poor doors are visible. They are a brilliant, instantly comprehensible distillation of an entire complex of social, cultural and political attitudes'



'The success of Downton Abbey was down to the glorious relief it offered. The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate.'

I first read about so-called "poor doors" – separate, less salubrious entrances in mixed-use apartment blocks, giving access to the subsidised housing without the rich inhabitants being sullied by the poorer residents' presence – in an article about the failed attempts of New York's west side to integrate those at economic odds with each other. "I bet they do that here, too," I thought and, with the fearless investigative fervour for which I am known, turned the page. But guess what? I was right – they do! I knew there had to be something we could do as well as the Americans and I think, if pushed, I would have bet it would be something like this.

I've often thought that the success of Downton Abbey was mostly down to the glorious relief it offered. The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate – estates ordered and everyone knowing exactly where they stood. Bar the occasional ladyship getting out of the bath and on to a malevolently misplaced sliver of soap on the period-perfectly tiled floor, of course. Class divisions hid in plain sight, so entrenched as to be invisible, so immutable as to be unremarkable. Slim, lovely ladies and gentlemen upstairs, knobbly, earthy types down below like semi-sentient potatoes, and never the twain shall meet except for the purposes of plot propulsion and/or the transmission of syphilis.

Nowadays everything's forced underground and not literally as in days of yore. Nobody talks about class any more, unless a politician or cretin at a dinner party wants to claim that everyone is middle class because nobody is actually picking oakum in a workhouse (though we go to press a few days in advance and Dave C does seem to be an ever-spewing fountain of ideas, so apols if this has become a mandatory part of claiming DLA by the time you read this).

The talk is all of scroungers and skivers versus hard-working families and "squeezed middles". (Which is simply a mathematical term applied to income distribution, guys! It's not a way of appealing to people brought up to think of private education, along with three foreign holidays a year and enough disposable income to buy Arabella and Bottletop a little flat – to share, only to share! – in Chelsea when they graduate, as a human right.) This usefully obscures the history of class segregation and lack of social mobility, which are problems that, once seen clearly to exist, would equally clearly be seen to be the responsibility of the state to solve via the provision of equal educational, economic and other opportunities, and places the blame squarely with the individual. A très classy move in itself, I think you will agree.

But poor doors are visible. They are a brilliant, instantly comprehensible distillation of an entire complex of social, cultural and political attitudes. They are portals into storied centuries of privilege, prejudice and protection rackets of all kinds. They are a gift to anyone – in the Labour party, say – who wanted to take the electorate by the hand and lead them round the shiny, fragile edifice, listing on shallow foundations and permeated by the faint but persistent stink of moral squalor that is the house that Conservatism built.

Come on, please, Ed, someone, anyone – blow the bloody doors off and show everyone what's inside.

Lucy Mangan - The Guardian