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Dining rooms are not cut out for modern life



Etiquette requires such an effort: polishing cutlery, washing up serving dishes - and you have to dress the part

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Britons can't be bothered with separate eating areas, says Alice Thomson. We want home cinemas instead

First it was fish knives and finger bowls, next went napkin rings and decanters, then mustard pots and marmalade spoons, now the British are throwing out the entire dining room. We have had enough of them.

They were usually dingy affairs anyway, the place where mothers laid out sewing patterns and fathers filled out tax returns, where children were told to keep their elbows off the table and great aunts served prune juice. With their swag curtains and brown furniture, they were a sign that you had finally made it to the middle classes.

In days gone by, they also facilitated the dating game, as Amanda Foreman, author of *Georgiana, the Duchess of Devonshire*, explains: "Dining rooms were vital in the 18th century. It was one of the few ways that a man could meet a single woman." Times have changed; the internet takes care of social introductions now.

No one shows off about their dining rooms anymore. Dining rooms were for hostess trolleys and hot plates, vol-au-vents and souffles. They required a huge amount of effort. If you have a dining room you can't serve the carrots out of the saucepan.

You have to put them in a serving dish. Even the ice-cream has to be decanted and, along with the rest of the food, either has to be trundled along a corridor or dispatched through a hatch in the wall.

The washing-up involved in having a dining room is horrendous. Most are also filled with silver which means several hours a week polishing the candelabra. And the cutlery. You must have serious cutlery, as well as a proper dinner service. Then there are curtains to think about and formal chairs. You have to dress the part too. Pyjamas look as out of place as a milk carton at a dining room table.

It's easy to see why the dining room has gone the way of trifles and Christmas pudding. It requires too much perspiration. Far easier to knock the kitchen and the dining room into one huge space and let the children use it as a football pitch and grazing ground.

Everyone has open kitchens now, from David Cameron to Posh and Becks and Jamie Oliver. Guests on Location, Location are more likely to ask for wet rooms than dining rooms. Kathy Lette, the comedienne, changed hers into a television room because she "loathes entertaining". Even the Queen prefers having her breakfast out of tupperware in an informal atmosphere.

No wonder more than half a million dining rooms are likely to be demolished over the next twelve months, according to Halifax Home Insurance. While sales of home office furniture have increased by 40 per cent since 2000, according to Mintel, there has been an 18 per cent drop in dining room furniture sales.

Location, Location's Kirsty Allsopp will not lament their demise. "They are fantastic if you are very rich. But most people have to divide their rooms by expenditure.

If you buy a four-bedroom house for £350,000 with a dining room, kitchen and sitting room, you will be spending £50,000 on a room you use once a year at Christmas. You could take the whole family to the Caribbean for that," she says.

But like chandeliers and chaise longues, once we have forsaken this seeming anachronism we will miss it. The dining room inspires good manners. Here you can talk late into the night without being distracted by the sight of all the washing-up and there is no one to watch you unwrap the M & S red cabbage and pass it off as your own.

Andrew Roberts, the historian, has two dining rooms, one upstairs and one down, in which to entertain cabinet ministers and presidents from around the world. "It's tragic that they are disappearing," he says.

"Dining rooms are often the most beautiful and tranquil rooms in a house. It's a terrible comment on our lack of hospitality that people now sit round the kitchen table to talk. Guests are in a much better mood when they go into a room specifically designed for eating and talking. It's like being on a stage, there is a need to perform."

A sense of occasion is what we are missing from modern life, says Katharine Whitehorn, who wrote *Cooking in a Bedsitter* in the 1970s. Having started the trend against dining rooms, she now repents. "Eating food off your lap or out of the fridge or virtually in the sink isn't that marvellous.

Too many dining rooms have been turned into offices and TV rooms, she says." So bring back the dining room - although this time round we can forsake the fish knives."