

Welcome to the house of fun

Cliveden — the backdrop to the Profumo affair in the Sixties — has been a hotbed of sexual and political intrigue for three centuries. The historian Natalie Livingstone, who is married to its billionaire owner, gives *Christina Patterson* an intimate tour

Portraits by *Lottie Davies*





The first thing you see when you drive into the grounds of Cliveden is the Fountain of Love. When William Waldorf Astor commissioned this giant marble sculpture of semi-naked women rising out of a pool, he couldn't have guessed how apt it would be. He knew that the poet Alexander Pope had described the Italianate mansion on the river Thames as a "bower of wanton... love". He knew that it had been associated with sexual and political intrigue throughout its 220-year history. But he didn't know that, 68 years after he bought it, for \$1.25m in 1893, a beautiful young woman would climb out of a pool and bring down a government.

"I think if you were to do a poll," says the mansion's newest owner, another beautiful woman, standing in front of me, "on what word you would most associate with Cliveden, it's scandal." Scandal, of course, was the name of the film made about what came to be known as the Profumo affair. Christine Keeler, a 19-year-old "good-time girl", was staying with her friend Stephen Ward in the house he rented in the grounds of Cliveden, and they had decided to cool off in the pool. She took off her swimsuit for a bet, and was dashing across the patio when the guests from a dinner party at the main house decided to

take a stroll. They included John Profumo, the secretary of state for war, and Yevgeny Ivanov, a Russian intelligence officer. Keeler had an affair with Profumo, which she later described as "a very, very well-mannered screw of convenience". She also claimed she slept with the Russian spy. It didn't, as the history books tell us, end well.

The woman in front of me is Natalie Livingstone and she has written a history book of her own. In 2011, when her husband, the property billionaire Ian Livingstone, decided to buy Cliveden, now a five-star hotel, with his brother Richard, he took Natalie up to the house for lunch. "We drove up the driveway," she says, "and I took in the view of the house. It was almost like a spell had been cast on me. I walked into the great hall, and I looked at the portraits of the women, and I knew that I wanted to find out more."

If I were to roll up at this stunning mansion, in spectacular grounds on the edge of a cliff above the Thames, and gaze at the architectural beauties of the main house, and the west wing, and the east wing, and the clock tower, and the old stables, and wander round the gardens, and sweep up and down the enormous parterre, and peer at the priceless treasures inside, and be told that

all of this was mine, or partly mine, I would certainly feel that a spell had been cast. Particularly if I knew the whole caboodle was costing about £30m.

For the Livingstones, that's relatively small fry. London & Regional, the property company owned and run by the Livingstone brothers, includes in its London portfolio the Park Lane Hilton, the Strand Palace Hotel and the Empire Leicester Square. Their combined assets are said to be worth more than £4bn. Unlike most of the previous owners of Cliveden, it isn't inherited wealth. The sons of an Ealing dentist, the brothers — one an optometrist, the other a surveyor — started buying property in their twenties. Now they have a business empire that includes the freeholds of 49 acute-care hospitals, 91 nursing homes, the Lovell's Wharf riverside development in Greenwich and the business park where Diageo has its global headquarters. As business enterprises go, it sure beats journalism.

Which is lucky for Natalie, because she, like me, is a journalist. She has worked for Tatler. She has worked for OK!. She has interviewed people such as Princess Charlene of Monaco and Anya Hindmarch, which might lead you to believe that she's a spoiled little rich girl who's obsessed with celebrities and fashion. It might, in fact, make you think that she's a lady who lunches, a pretty little thing who found a project when her husband bought a house.

Natalie Livingstone is a pretty little thing. She is beautiful in the way Jemima Khan is beautiful, with the same kind of delicate complexion, fine features and long, swishy hair. She has the longest eyelashes I've ever seen on a human being and, as far as I can tell, they're real. In her neat jacket, skinny jeans and leopard-print pumps (she can't wear heels at the moment because she's recovering from a skiing accident), she is waif-like and chic. And she *does* like celebrities and fashion.

"I love fashion," she tells me, over coffee in a wood-panelled library full of portraits of children in ruffs. "I love beauty. I love writing about that. I love looking at celebrities. I love pretty dresses. It's fun. But this is really what ignites my passion. The book and history and finding out about these stories is something that really inspires me. And if you look at these women, they can all be frivolous. There's nothing wrong with it."

She's talking about the women in her book, *The Mistresses of Cliveden*. If you're expecting a light, slight coffee-table book, you're in for a shock. Livingstone's book is a 512-page doorstopper with more than 30 pages of notes, long lists of "archival sources" and a bibliography that might make you feel in need of a little lie-down. It's a proper work of serious history and comes with a puff from her "idol" Amanda Foreman, who describes it as "utterly fascinating and completely beguiling". As its subtitle implies, it covers "three centuries of scandal, power and intrigue" and is packed with detail. And I mean packed. It isn't a light

"It was Anna Maria's job to please men at the dawn of Cliveden, and in the twilight of Cliveden, it was Christine Keeler's job to please men"



POOL GIRL Christine Keeler in 1963, the year her fling with John Profumo scandalised a nation and ultimately brought down the Tory government



NEW GIRL Since Natalie Livingstone's husband bought Cliveden — now a hotel — for £30m, she has been feverishly penning its history

read. “When I first started writing the book,” says Livingstone, who has, by the way, a first-class degree in history from Cambridge, “I thought it was going to be a very salacious read. I thought there was going to be a lot of sex. I thought there were going to be orgies.” So, to be honest, did I. I was quite looking forward to them. By the time I finished reading it, I felt I’d done a PhD.

The book tells the stories of the five “mistresses” of Cliveden. The first is Anna Maria Talbot (1642-1702), married to the Earl of Shrewsbury and mistress to the Duke of Buckingham, who killed Anna Maria’s

husband in a duel. Anna Maria was a celebrity mistress. She was almost as famous as Nell Gwynn. She was also famous for her beauty, which she maintained by coating her skin in boiled puppy fat, and wearing gloves made of chicken skin. For some years, she lived in a ménage à trois with Buckingham and his wife, Mary. Buckingham built Cliveden as a (rather big) love nest. Unfortunately, he and Anna Maria never got to live in it. They were ordered never to see each other again after a debate in the House of Lords.

The second mistress is Elizabeth Villiers, who had a severe squint, but still became

“royal whore” to William of Orange. When his wife and co-regent, Mary, died, he promised to give up the affair, but made Elizabeth the richest woman in the land. She wasn’t pretty, but she was certainly bright. Her friend Jonathan Swift described her as “the wisest woman I ever saw”. The aristocrat and writer Lady Mary Wortley Montague was less generous. At the coronation of George II, she described Elizabeth as “a mixture of fat and wrinkles” with “a considerable pair of bubbys a good deal withered”.

The third mistress, who was only a mistress in the sense of “mistress of the house”, is ➤➤➤

Princess Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, who, at 17, became the Princess of Wales. Spotted by George II as a suitable wife for his son Frederick, she was packed off to Britain to get married in a ceremony where she didn't understand a word.

The fourth mistress, who certainly wouldn't have wanted to be known as a mistress in the sexual sense, is Harriet, Duchess of Sutherland. Brought up at Castle Howard, she became the richest wife in England and Queen Victoria's best friend. When Cliveden caught fire, for the second time in its history, it was Queen Victoria, just down the road at Windsor, who spotted the flames. Harriet spoke out against slavery, but was slagged off for it by Karl Marx. Some of her massive wealth, he pointed out, came from the Highland Clearances, which forced thousands of crofters out of their homes. Like most of the owners of Cliveden, Harriet had never bothered all that much about where her whopping great fortune came from.

The fifth and final mistress is Nancy Astor, Britain's first female MP (see panel, right). She's unlikely to have been anyone's mistress, since she "supposedly developed a habit of biting into an apple to distract her from the distasteful business of sex". She was pretty unpleasant to her husband, Waldorf Astor, even though he was the son of one of the richest men in the world. She was also horrible to her children. But she was very good at entertaining. Her butler later became the model for Stevens in Kazuo Ishiguro's Booker-prize-winning novel, *The Remains of the Day*. What she was very, very good at was luring famous people to her table.

Nancy's guests at Cliveden ranged from Churchill to Charlie Chaplin, HG Wells, JM Barrie, Gandhi and Rudyard Kipling. TE Lawrence (of Arabia) took her for a ride on his motorbike. On a trip to Russia, she shook hands with Stalin and washed George Bernard Shaw's beard. On a trip to Berlin, her husband met Hitler. She was, in other words, right at the heart of the political and cultural life of her day. It was at Cliveden that her close friend, the diplomat Philip Kerr, dreamt up the clause in the Treaty of Versailles that held Germany financially responsible for the First World War, which may well have played a part in causing the Second World War. In 1936 she met the German ambassador, Joachim von Ribbentrop, later foreign minister to Hitler. She was, at least for a while, in favour of appeasement. After the Second World War, she was trying to repair the damage to her reputation when Ribbentrop asked her to testify at his Nuremberg trial.

Livingstone's book isn't likely to win prizes for literary style, but as a grand sweep of English history, it's quite a feat. From the bibliography, it looks like a life's work. "An academic," she says, when I point this out to her, "would probably take five years." She has done it in less than two. On the advice of her former tutor at Christ's College, Cambridge, she took on some researchers. (And could, presumably, afford to pay them.) "But it was

No sex, please, I'm running for parliament

In this extract, *Natalie Livingstone* reveals how the American socialite Nancy Astor became the slightly reluctant mistress of Cliveden and Britain's first female MP

IT was during her heady first season in England that Nancy, a divorcee, fell deeply in love. The object of her affection was John Baring, Lord Revelstoke, chairman of the merchant bank Baring Brothers and 16 years her senior. Revelstoke, although attracted to Nancy, was in no rush to commit. The romance inevitably broke down. Heartbroken, Nancy resolved to return to her home in Virginia. As she was departing on a train to Liverpool, another admirer, Sidney Herbert, the 16th Baron Elphinstone, jumped onto the train and proposed.

Nancy did not stay in Virginia for long, and when she returned to England in December 1905, Elphinstone assumed she would be his wife. He planned to meet her at the Liverpool dock, but he arrived to find he had a rival: Nancy had met Waldorf Astor on the boat. He had heard all about the gregarious Langhorne girl, and arranged to travel on the same steamship so he could meet her. Nancy now had two extremely viable marriage options, and she agonised over her choice. She wrote to her sister Phyllis: "One has one thing I like best and the other has another." Her letter contained a strong clue as to the "thing" of Waldorf's that Nancy liked best: Waldorf was in line to become the "fourth richest man in the world". She later wrote: "The gig's up and I am engaged to Waldorf."

In 1906, Nancy and Waldorf spent their first Christmas at Cliveden as a married couple. Although she felt deep affection for Waldorf, Nancy struggled with physical intimacy; she resented having to share a bed with her new husband.

By 1909, Nancy and Waldorf's parties had evolved into rather more political events than they had been previously. For around this time Waldorf was embarking on a career in the Conservative party. In January 1910 he stood for election as MP for Plymouth. He was defeated by his Liberal rival, but the campaign afforded Nancy her first taste of electioneering, and she found herself

to be a natural. "Addressed a collection of workmen," she wrote in her diary. "I am becoming a mob orator. A female Lloyd George — God forbid."

There was a second election in December of that year, and this one they intended to win. Nancy marched from tenement to tenement, dressed in her fur and jewels, knocking on every door, and delivering the same line: "I am Mrs Astor. My husband is standing for parliament. Will you vote for him?" In December, thanks in part to Nancy's energy, Waldorf won.

On October 19, 1919, a death in the Astor family would turn Nancy from a spectator of politics into an actor of seminal importance. Waldorf received a phone call informing him that his father, William, had died. He was now Viscount Astor and his career in the Commons was over. A new member for his constituency, the Sutton division of Plymouth, would have to be found, and a by-election fought. Waldorf's younger brother, John, declined the invitation. It was only a matter of time before the party looked to Nancy. But the prospect divided the local party association.

The main objection was, obviously, that Nancy was a woman. There were other objections: her straight-talking manner was seen by many as "abrasive", and her behaviour in debates as "bolshie". But the local Conservatives resolved their differences, and on October 22, Nancy received a telegram inviting her to stand. If she agreed, she reasoned, it would only be a temporary measure, in the hope that Waldorf would succeed in his latest bid to reclaim his seat through an act of parliament.

Eventually, at a loss, Nancy called for her butler, Mr Lee. "Oh Lee," she said, "I've talked to so many people about Plymouth, what do you think I should do?" "I should go for it, my lady," he replied. In his memoirs, Lee recounted the rest of the story: "Now I'm not so big headed as to think that my opinion swayed her in any way but a couple of days later she again sent for me. 'Lee, I've decided to take your advice. I'm going to 'go for it', as you said.'"

“She supposedly developed a habit of biting into an apple to distract her from the distasteful business of sex”



AMERICAN BEAUTY What attracted Nancy Langhorne to “fourth-richest man in the world” Waldorf Astor?

very, very important to me that I didn’t delegate. I had to make sure that I saw every single letter. I was an absolute control freak about that. I was,” she explains, “a real recluse. I just sat in what my girls would call ‘the room of pain’, without any connection to the outside world. It’s the only way you can really focus.”

Her “girls” are Alice, 8, and Grace, 11. “It was a really difficult time. I really felt I had to make a bit of a sacrifice. I’m fortunate in that I’m in a position where I was able to hire childcare, but I didn’t enjoy doing that. It’s not the same. At the end of work every day, in the summer holidays, we did a little video blog of my slow and steady degeneration.”

If she went through any kind of “degeneration” in writing this book, it isn’t evident now. When she says that she relates “so much to Elizabeth” — Mistress No 2, with the squint — I almost wonder if I’ve misheard.

Has she looked in the mirror lately? However, she is equally sympathetic towards the other women in her book. “In Anna Maria’s time,” she says, “the only way a woman could assert any power was through her sex. Women have to be beautiful. Women have to be available. It’s this strange culture of pursuit and possession.” Anna Maria, she says, “oozes sensuality and wields it like a weapon.”

Did Anna Maria enjoy sex? Livingstone looks thoughtful. “I think,” she says, “it was her job. I think it’s quite sad. What was fascinating for me is that it was Anna Maria’s job to please men. That was right at the dawn of Cliveden, and in the twilight of Cliveden, it was Christine Keeler’s job to please men.

“One thing that did occur to me,” she adds, “was that for these women, probably with the exception of Harriet, the true passions of their life were not their husband.

Their husbands gave them security and stability and enabled them to have the status, but actually the love and passion came from elsewhere. It’s quite a depressing view of marriage, that marriage is transactional.”

Which is, you might think, an interesting observation from someone who’s married to a billionaire and lives in a house in Notting Hill, formerly owned by Elisabeth Murdoch and Matthew Freud. Livingstone was in her second year at Cambridge when she met her husband at a dinner. “I fell in love with him,” she says simply, “and I’m 38 now, and I’ve been with him ever since.” They got married at the synagogue in Great Portland Street, but missed the honeymoon because her husband “got ill”. But the rest of her marriage, she says, and I try very hard to look pleased for her, has been “honeymoon enough”.

Livingstone, who grew up in Finchley and went to City of London School for Girls, is the daughter of a Hungarian mother and a father from the East End of London who “did incredibly well”. He left school at 12 to work in a shirt shop, set up his own textile business and “was able to put three children through private school”. Since her early twenties she has been very rich indeed. Does she identify with the previous Cliveden women as a member of the super-rich? “Look,” she says, looking uncomfortable. “I feel incredibly grateful for the privileges I have, but I relate to them on a human level. Their financial circumstances are not something that I emotionally relate to.”

Okeydoke. That’s clear. But does she think that money is the new aristocracy — is she part of the new aristocracy? “Absolutely not. Money is a lovely privilege and it enables me to send my children to lovely schools and to choose which doctors I want if they’re ill, but that’s it. I don’t consider that it puts me in any different class from anyone else.”

Her smile gone, it is clearly time for our tour. In the Great Hall, we gaze at Peter Lely’s portrait of Anna Maria. At the top of the grand staircase are portraits of Augusta and Frederick, looking enigmatic in their powdered wigs. In Nancy Astor’s bedroom, I stare at her enormous bed and imagine her having sex while biting on an apple. A night in this suite will set you back about £1,600 today. Goodness only knows what all those dead aristocrats would make of the fact that anyone can now sit in their Great Hall for the price of an afternoon tea.

You can also, by the way, go for a swim. If you pay to go to the spa, you can take a dip in that famous pool. The beautiful, and surprisingly down-to-earth, new “mistress” of Cliveden has swum in it. (So down-to-earth that, at lunch overlooking the parterre, she asks for tomato ketchup with her roasted wild sea bass.) On a sunny day, the pool is gorgeous. Just make sure you keep your swimsuit on ■ *The Mistresses of Cliveden: Three Centuries of Scandal, Power and Intrigue* (Hutchinson, £25) is published on July 2. To buy it for £22 (inc p&p), call 0845 271 2135 or visit thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop