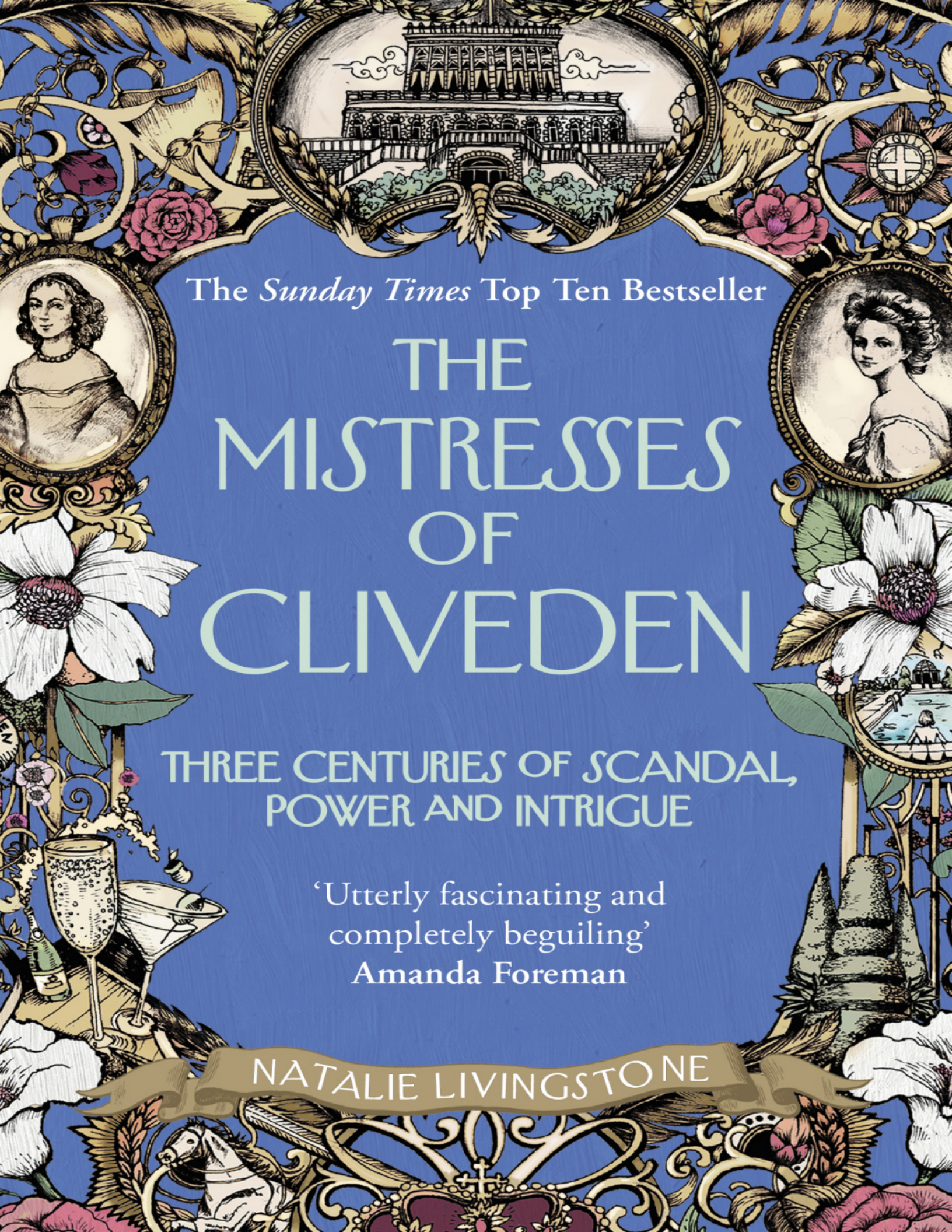




The *Sunday Times* Top Ten Bestseller

THE MISTRESSES OF CLIVEDEN

THREE CENTURIES OF SCANDAL,
POWER AND INTRIGUE

‘Utterly fascinating and
completely beguiling’
Amanda Foreman

NATALIE LIVINGSTONE

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About the Book

From its construction in the 1660s to its heyday in the 1960s, Cliveden played host to a dynasty of remarkable and powerful women.

Anna Maria, Elizabeth, Augusta, Harriet and Nancy were five ladies who, over the course of three centuries, shaped British society through their beauty, personalities, and political influence.

Restoration and revolution, aristocratic rise and fall, world war and cold war form the extraordinary backdrop against which their stories unfold.

An addictive history of the period and an intimate exploration of the timeless relationships between people and place, *The Mistresses of Cliveden* is a story of sex, power and politics, and the ways in which exceptional women defy the expectations of their time.

About the Author

Natalie Livingstone was born and raised in London. She graduated with a first-class degree in history from Christ's College, Cambridge in 1998. She began her career as a feature writer at the *Daily Express* and now contributes to *Tatler*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *US Vogue*, *Elle*, *The Times* and the *Mail on Sunday*. Natalie lives in London with her husband and two children.

THE MISTRESSES OF CLIVEDEN

THREE CENTURIES OF SCANDAL,
POWER AND INTRIGUE

NATALIE LIVINGSTONE



arrow books

For Ian, Grace and Alice

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Characters who appear in more than one part are listed under their first appearance.

PART I

ANNA MARIA TALBOT (née Brudenell), Countess of SHREWSBURY, 1642–1702. Married Francis Talbot, 11th Earl of Shrewsbury, and had an affair with George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham. With Mary Villiers, the first mistress of Cliveden.

FRANCIS TALBOT, 11th Earl of SHREWSBURY, 1623–68. Husband of Anna Maria Talbot, died following a duel with George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham.

GEORGE VILLIERS, 2nd Duke of BUCKINGHAM, 1628–87. Husband of Mary Villiers, lover of Anna Maria Talbot, and creator of Cliveden.

CHARLES TALBOT, Duke of SHREWSBURY, 1660–1718. Politician; son of Anna Maria and Francis Talbot.

MARY VILLIERS (née Fairfax), 1638–1704. Wife of George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham; with Anna Maria Talbot, the first mistress of Cliveden.

CHARLES II, King of England, Scotland and Ireland from 1660–85.

BARBARA PALMER (née VILLIERS),
Duchess of Cleveland.

ELEANOR 'NELL' GWYN.

]

MISTRESSES OF
CHARLES II

JAMES, Duke of YORK (James II from 1685–88). Younger brother of Charles II.

JOHN DRYDEN. Writer, and artistic rival of the 2nd Duke of Buckingham.

HENRY BENNET, 1st Earl of ARLINGTON. Statesman, and political rival of the 2nd Duke of Buckingham.

SAMUEL PEPYS. Diarist.

WILLIAM WINDE. Architect to the 2nd Duke of Buckingham.

PART II

ELIZABETH VILLIERS (married name HAMILTON), Countess of Orkney, 1657–1733. Lover of William of Orange (later William III); married George Hamilton, Earl of Orkney in 1695. Mistress of Cliveden from 1696 to 1733.

GEORGE HAMILTON, Earl of ORKNEY, 1666–1737. Soldier; husband of Elizabeth Villiers.

LADY ANNE, 2nd Countess of ORKNEY, 1700–77. Eldest surviving daughter of Elizabeth and George Hamilton; married William O'Brien.

LADY FRANCES.

LADY HENRIETTA.

DAUGHTERS OF
ELIZABETH AND
GEORGE HAMILTON

WILLIAM of ORANGE (William III from 1689–1702).

Husband of Mary Stuart; deposer of James II in the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688.

ANNE HAMILTON, *suo jure* 3rd Duchess of HAMILTON, 1632–1716. Wife of William Douglas, 1st Earl of Selkirk; mother of George Hamilton, 1st Earl of Orkney.

JAMES HAMILTON, 4th Duke of HAMILTON and 1st Duke of Brandon, 1658–1712. Eldest son of Anne Hamilton and

William Douglas; elder brother of George Hamilton, 1st Earl of Orkney.

PRINCESS MARY, 1662–94. Wife of William of Orange (later William III). Ruled as Queen Mary II from 1689–1694.

PRINCESS ANNE, 1665–1714. Ruled as Queen Anne from 1702–1714.

DAUGHTERS OF
JAMES II

SARAH CHURCHILL (née JENNINGS), Duchess of MARLBOROUGH, 1660–1744. Politician; wife of John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough.

JOHN CHURCHILL, 1st Duke of MARLBOROUGH, 1650–1722. Army officer and politician; husband of Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough.

JONATHAN SWIFT. Writer, and Dean of St Patrick's in Dublin; friend of Elizabeth, Countess of Orkney.

SIDNEY GODOLPHIN, 1st Earl of GODOLPHIN. Politician, overthrown in Robert Harley's coup of 1710.

ROBERT HARLEY, 1st Earl of OXFORD. Politician, and sometime ally of Elizabeth Villiers.

THOMAS ARCHER. Architect to the Earl of Orkney.

LADY MARY WORTLEY MONTAGU. Writer.

PART III

AUGUSTA, Princess of WALES (Princess AUGUSTA of SAXE-GOTHA), 1719–72. Mistress of Cliveden 1738–51; married Frederick, Prince of Wales in 1736.

FREDERICK, Prince of WALES, 1707–51. Eldest son (and heir) of George II and his consort Queen Caroline, and husband of Augusta, Princess of Wales.

PRINCESS AUGUSTA, 1737–1813.

PRINCE GEORGE (later GEORGE III),
1738–1820.

PRINCE EDWARD (later Duke of York
and Albany), 1739–67.

PRINCESS ELIZABETH, 1741–59.

PRINCE WILLIAM HENRY (later Duke of
Gloucester and Edinburgh), 1743–1805.

CHILDREN OF
FREDERICK AND
AUGUSTA

GEORGE II, 1683–1760. King of Great Britain and Ireland
1727–60. Father of Frederick, Prince of Wales; husband
of Caroline of Ansbach.

QUEEN CAROLINE (Caroline of Brandenburg-Ansbach),
1683–1737. Mother of Frederick, Prince of Wales; wife of
George II.

Lady JANE HAMILTON. Mistress of Frederick, Prince of
Wales, and sister-in-law of George Hamilton, 1st Earl of
Orkney.

JOHN HERVEY, 2nd Baron HERVEY, 1696–1743. Courtier
and memoirist; favourite of Queen Caroline.

Prince WILLIAM, Duke of CUMBERLAND. Soldier, and
brother of Frederick, Prince of Wales.

JOHN STUART, 3rd Earl of BUTE. Tutor to Prince George.

WILLIAM KENT. Designer to the Prince and Princess of
Wales.

PART IV

HARRIET GEORGIANA LEVESON-GOWER (née Howard),
Duchess of SUTHERLAND, 1806–68. Married her cousin,
George Leveson-Gower, in 1823. Mistress of Cliveden
from 1849 to 1868.

GEORGE LEVESON-GOWER, 2nd Duke of SUTHERLAND,
1786–1861. Husband of Harriet, Duchess of Sutherland.

GEORGE GRANVILLE LEVESON-GOWER, 1st Duke of SUTHERLAND, 1758-1833. Husband of Elizabeth; father of George Leveson-Gower, 2nd Duke of Sutherland.

ELIZABETH LEVESON-GOWER, Duchess of SUTHERLAND (and *suo jure* 19th Countess of Sutherland), 1765-1839. Wife of George Granville Leveson-Gower; mother of George Leveson-Gower, 2nd Duke of Sutherland.

LADY ELIZABETH GEORGIANA, 1824-78.

LADY EVELYN, 1825-69.

LADY CAROLINE, 1827-87.

LORD GEORGE GRANVILLE WILLIAM
(succeeded as 3rd Duke of Sutherland),
1828-92.

CHILDREN OF
HARRIET AND
GEORGE
LEVESON-
GOWER

LADY BLANCHE JULIA, 1830-32.

LORD FREDERICK GEORGE, 1832-54.

LADY CONSTANCE GERTRUDE, 1834-80.

LADY VICTORIA, 1838-39.

LORD ALBERT, 1843-74.

LORD RONALD CHARLES, 1845-1916.

LADY ALEXANDRINA ('Aline'), 1848-49.

CHILDREN OF
HARRIET AND
GEORGE
LEVESON-
GOWER

QUEEN VICTORIA (Alexandrina Victoria), 1819-1901.

Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland from 1837-1901; friend of Harriet, Duchess of Sutherland, who served for many years as her Mistress of the Robes.

WILLIAM GLADSTONE. Politician, and friend of Harriet, Duchess of Sutherland.

CHARLES BARRY. Architect to the Sutherlands.

HUGH LUPUS GROSVENOR, 1st Duke of WESTMINSTER, 1825–99. Married Constance Sutherland-Leveson-Gower in 1852; two years after Constance’s death in 1880, he remarried, to Katherine Caroline Cavendish.

PART V

NANCY ASTOR (née Langhorne), Viscountess ASTOR, 1879–1964. Mistress of Cliveden from 1906 to 1952. Married Robert Gould Shaw in 1897 and divorced him in 1903; married Waldorf Astor in 1906.

WALDORF ASTOR, 2nd Viscount ASTOR, 1879–1952.
Second husband of Nancy Astor.

ROBERT GOULD SHAW, 1871–1930. First husband of Nancy Astor.

BOBBIE SHAW (Robert Gould Shaw), 1898–1970. Eldest son of Nancy Astor, and her only child with Robert Shaw.

BILL (William Waldorf Astor II), 1907–1966.

WISSIE (Nancy Phyllis Louise Astor),
1909–1975.

DAVID (Francis David Langhorne Astor),
1912–2001.

MICHAEL (Michael Langhorne Astor),
1916–1980.

JAKIE (John Jacob Astor VII), 1918–2000.

CHILDREN OF
NANCY AND
WALDORF ASTOR

NANCY WITCHER KEENE LANGHORNE, ‘NANAIRE’, 1848–1903. Mother of Nancy Astor; wife of Chillie Langhorne.

CHISWELL DABNEY LANGHORNE, ‘CHILLIE’, 1843–1919.
Father of Nancy Astor; husband of Nanaire.

WILLIAM WALDORF ASTOR, 1st Viscount ASTOR, 1848–1919. Father of Waldorf Astor.

LIZZIE, 1865–1916.

IRENE, 1873–1956.

PHYLLIS, 1880–1937.

NORA, 1889–1955.



BOB BRAND (Robert Henry Brand), Baron BRAND, 1878–1963. Married to Phyllis Brand; public servant and banker, and friend of Nancy Astor.

PHILIP KERR, 11th Marquess of LOTHIAN, 1882–1940. Politician and diplomat; close friend of Nancy Astor.

ROSINA (ROSE) HARRISON. Nancy Astor's maid.

ETTIE GRENFELL, Lady DESBOROUGH. The Astors' neighbour at Taplow Court.

STEPHEN WARD. Society osteopath and friend of Bill Astor.

CHRISTINE KEELER. Model and showgirl.

JACK PROFUMO (John Dennis Profumo). Conservative politician.

TIMELINE

- 1642 ANNA MARIA BRUDENELL born
- 1642–1651 English Civil War
- 1657 ELIZABETH VILLIERS born
- 1659 ANNA MARIA marries Francis Talbot, 11th Earl of Shrewsbury
- 1660 The Restoration: Charles II becomes king
- 1666 ANNA MARIA begins her affair with the 2nd Duke of Buckingham
- The Duke of Buckingham buys the Cliveden estate
- Great Fire of London
- 1668 The Duke of Buckingham fights a duel with the Earl of Shrewsbury; Earl of Shrewsbury dies
- 1674 ANNA MARIA and the Duke of Buckingham ordered by the House of Lords to separate
- 1676 Construction of a new house begins at Cliveden
- 1677 ANNA MARIA remarries
- Princess Mary marries William of Orange; ELIZABETH accompanies them to live in the Dutch Republic
- 1679–1681 The Exclusion Crisis
- 1685 ELIZABETH begins an affair with William of Orange
- James II becomes king; the Duke of Monmouth

- attempts a rebellion and is executed on Tower Hill
- 1687 The 2nd Duke of Buckingham dies
- 1688 The Glorious Revolution: William of Orange invades England, deposing James II and becoming William III
- 1689 ELIZABETH returns to England
William III and Mary II become co-regents
- 1694 Queen Mary dies; her dying wish is that William end his affair with ELIZABETH
- 1695 ELIZABETH given Irish lands by William III; marries George Hamilton, Earl of Orkney
- 1696 The Earl of Orkney buys Cliveden
- 1700 ELIZABETH stripped of her Irish lands by Parliament
- 1701–1714 War of the Spanish Succession, in which the Earl of Orkney and the Duke of Marlborough fight
- 1702 ANNA MARIA dies
William III dies; Anne becomes queen
- 1704 Battle of Blenheim (part of the War of the Spanish Succession), in which Marlborough distinguishes himself
- 1706 Thomas Archer begins renovating Cliveden for the Orkneys
Battle of Ramillies (part of the War of the Spanish Succession), in which Orkney leads a charge across the Petite Ghee
- 1707 The Act of Union joins the crowns and parliaments of Scotland and England
- 1712 Archer's renovation of Cliveden complete
- 1714 Queen Anne dies; George I becomes king
- 1717 George I's first visit to Cliveden

- 1719 PRINCESS AUGUSTA OF SAXE-GOTHA born
- 1727 Giacomo Leoni's Blenheim Pavilion built at Cliveden
- George II succeeds his father as king
- 1729 Queen Caroline and her son Frederick, Prince of Wales visit Cliveden
- 1733 ELIZABETH dies
- 1735 Leoni's Octagon Temple built at Cliveden
- 1736 AUGUSTA marries Frederick, son of George II
- 1737 Earl of Orkney dies and Cliveden passes to Anne, 2nd Countess of Orkney
- AUGUSTA and Frederick lease Cliveden
- 1738 AUGUSTA gives birth to George William Frederick, later George III
- 1740 'Rule, Britannia!' performed at Cliveden
- 1745 Bonnie Prince Charlie lands in Scotland; Jacobite Rebellion
- 1746 Battle of Culloden
- 1751 Frederick dies; Anne, Countess of Orkney, regains possession of Cliveden
- 1760 George II dies; succeeded by AUGUSTA's son George III
- 1772 AUGUSTA dies
- 1795 Cliveden burns down; the ruins become popular among tourists interested in Gothic sites
- 1806 HARRIET HOWARD born
- 1813 Architect Peter Nicholson commissioned to design a tea room by the Thames at Cliveden; George Devey would later develop the tea room into Spring Cottage
- 1813-1821 Highland Clearances in Sutherland

- 1821 Cliveden is sold at auction
- 1823 HARRIET marries George Gower, 2nd Duke of Sutherland
- 1824 Cliveden is conveyed to Sir George Warrender, who commissions William Burn to build a new main block
- 1832 First Reform Act
- 1833 HARRIET'S father-in-law, the 1st Duke of Sutherland, dies; HARRIET becomes the Duchess of Sutherland
- 1837 Victoria becomes queen
- 1839 Bedchamber Crisis
- 1848 The 'Year of Revolution' in Europe
- 1849 HARRIET and George buy Cliveden; the house burns down
- 1850 Architect Charles Barry produces plans to rebuild Cliveden
- 1851 Great Exhibition
- 1852 HARRIET enters the anti-slavery debate
- 1853 Gladstone confined at Dunrobin; becomes good friends with HARRIET
- 1855 Charles Barry is fired by the Sutherlands
- 1857 The Sutherlands employ George Devey and Henry Clutton to design several new structures for the grounds of the estate
- 1861 George, 2nd Duke of Sutherland, dies
- 1861–1865 American Civil War
- 1864 Garibaldi visits Cliveden
- 1866 Queen Victoria stays at Cliveden for ten days
- 1867 Second Reform Act
- 1868 HARRIET dies

- Cliveden is bought by Hugh Grosvenor, later the Duke of Westminster
- 1879 NANCY LANGHORNE born
- 1893 William Waldorf Astor buys Cliveden
- 1895 National Trust established
- 1897 NANCY marries Bob Shaw
- 1903 NANCY divorces Bob Shaw
- 1906 NANCY marries Waldorf Astor; Waldorf and NANCY given Cliveden as a wedding present; NANCY redesigns the garden and the interior
- 1914–1918 First World War; hospital built at Cliveden
- 1918 Representation of the People Act extends the vote to women aged 30 and over
- 1919 NANCY becomes the first female MP to take her seat
- 1937 *The Week* runs the Cliveden Set story
- 1939–1945 Second World War; new hospital built at Cliveden
- 1942 Waldorf approaches the National Trust about the donation of Cliveden
- 1945 NANCY resigns from Parliament
- 1952 Waldorf dies; NANCY gives Cliveden to their son Bill
- 1961 Jack Profumo meets Christine Keeler at Cliveden beside the newly built swimming pool
- 1963 Profumo Affair becomes a public scandal
- 1964 NANCY dies and is buried next to Waldorf at Cliveden
- 1966 Bill Astor dies of a heart attack. The Astors vacate Cliveden
- 1969– Stanford University leases Cliveden from the

1983	National Trust for use as an overseas campus
1970	Bobbie Shaw commits suicide
1985	Lease acquired by the Von Essen hotel group
2012	Lease acquired by Ian Livingstone of London and Regional Properties to run as a hotel

INTRODUCTION

ON THE SULTRY night of 8 July 1961, the 19-year-old showgirl Christine Keeler was in the swimming pool at Cliveden when she heard voices approaching from the terrace. She had been larking about with her friend Stephen Ward (who rented a cottage at the foot of the estate), a law student called Noel Howard-Jones, and a pretty young hitch-hiker whom the three of them had picked up on the drive down from London. Usually Ward asked permission to use the pool from the estate's owner Bill Astor, but tonight Bill was occupied by a more sober dinner party in the main house. The pool was tucked away in a walled garden on the west side of the property, so the group thought nothing of going for an impromptu swim without giving Astor prior warning. The party grew raucous, and at some point Keeler shed her swimsuit in a bet.

Up at the main house, the company at dinner included Field Marshal Ayub Khan, president of Pakistan, John Profumo, secretary of state for war, and his film-star wife Valerie. The hosts were Bill Astor, who had inherited the house from his parents Waldorf and Nancy, and Bill's wife Bronwen. After dinner, the hosts decided to take advantage of the balmy night and suggested a stroll down to the swimming pool to show off a newly installed bronze statue of their son riding a dolphin. What the guests actually saw, as they rounded the corner into the walled garden, was the lithe form of Christine Keeler, lifting herself from the pool and dashing across the patio, her feet making damp prints on the terracotta tiles. Profumo wasted no time in asking Bill for an introduction.

Late that night Keeler returned to London to pick up a couple more of Ward's girlfriends, and the next morning they were all driven back to Cliveden by the Russian naval attaché and intelligence officer Yevgeny Ivanov. The group spent a lazy Sunday by Bill Astor's pool, where Ivanov challenged Profumo to a swimming race. Just before Keeler left that evening, Profumo, who according to Ivanov had been 'flirting outrageously' with the young girl, asked for her contact details.¹ Ivanov drove Christine back to Ward's flat where, the Soviet attaché would later claim, they slept together. Two days later, Profumo tracked Keeler down and arranged to meet her while his wife Valerie was visiting his Warwickshire constituency. It marked the beginning of a tepid, half-hearted liaison, which Keeler – who once cooked them sausages before they had sex in front of the television – described as 'a very, very well-mannered screw of convenience'.²

The weekend at Cliveden was the first act in a drama that would bring down a government and change the course of British history. The apparent *ménage à trois* between the minister of war, a Soviet spy and a good-time girl made Cliveden synonymous with scandal in the collective consciousness of an entire generation.

But the outraged headlines and lurid scoops of the Profumo Affair – as it came to be known – were nothing new. During its dawn in the 1660s as much as its twilight in the 1960s, Cliveden was an emblem of elite misbehaviour and intrigue. Indeed the 350-year history of the house began when a powerful politician decided to build a secluded mansion in which to enjoy his affair with an ambitious courtesan not much older than Keeler. The courtesan was Anna Maria, Countess of Shrewsbury, and the politician George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, a childhood friend of Charles II and one of the wealthiest men in England. When Buckingham bought Cliveden in the

1660s, it comprised two modest hunting lodges set within 400 acres of land. Over the following decade, he transformed it, landscaping the gardens and constructing a magnificent house as a monument to his scandalous affair with the countess.

The estate sits just 5 miles upriver from Windsor Castle and fewer than 30 from the Palace of Westminster in London, a privileged location that would be crucial to the lives of its residents. Its outlines have changed little since the 17th century, and, then as now, Cliveden is one of England's most breathtaking landmarks. To the south-west, the grounds overlook the Thames from the tall chalk cliffs that give the site its name – over the centuries it has also been spelt Cliefden, Clifden, and Cliffden. Further north, the cliffs, which are densely planted with oak, beech, ash and chestnut, dip into a hollow, and the gardens trail like skirts down to the water. At the top of these gardens, at the end of a long parterre, and raised to an even more imperious height by an arcaded terrace, stands the house itself, an elaborate Italianate mansion, flanked by two wings and approached by road from the north, down a long gravel drive.

In April 2012 Cliveden became central to my life when my husband acquired the property. When it came into our possession it was no longer a private residence – Cliveden had been reincarnated as a university and a hospital, and latterly run as a hotel. But amid its faded charms there were clues everywhere to the past lives of the estate, most noticeably in the portraits of the house's former mistresses.

In the great hall hangs a portrait of Anna Maria, the original inspiration for the house, a courtesan much maligned in her own time and misunderstood by subsequent generations. Carved into the staircase is Elizabeth, Countess of Orkney, a formidable intellect, power-broker and long-time lover to Britain's conqueror of 1688, William III. Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, the queen that

Britain was promised and then denied in the middle of the 18th century, is immortalised in a painting over the grand staircase, while the fourth mistress, Harriet, Duchess of Sutherland, a glittering society hostess and the closest confidante of Queen Victoria, presides over the dining room. Finally, hanging beside the fireplace in the great hall is John Singer Sargent's portrait of Nancy Astor – Cliveden's last great mistress, Britain's first female Member of Parliament, and one of the most controversial and colourful women in British political history.

The struggles and sacrifices of these women, their juggling of outer image and inner life, are familiar and universal. Their privileges, however, were extraordinary. It is from their elite viewpoint that this book narrates the tumultuous events of the last three centuries: Restoration and Glorious Revolution, aristocratic rise and fall, two world wars and the Cold War. Along the way there are tales of fanaticism and fashion, of censorship, disease, slavery and the unlikely correlation between gardening and warfare.

As well as being a story about women and power, this book is also the biography of a house. Conceived by Stuart aristocracy, Cliveden later served as a counter-court during the power struggles of the Hanoverian dynasty, and in the 19th century became a crucible for a new brand of liberal politics, while continuing to offer a safe haven for royalty. With the decline of aristocratic wealth, it was one of the first houses to be bought up by American money, and in the later 20th and 21st centuries, it has become part of a new commercial order in which my husband and I – Jewish and self-made – play our part. Throughout the narrative Cliveden itself remains central – the constant character and a defining presence in the lives of all these women. For more than three centuries, the house provided opportunity and authority to women; in return, successive mistresses

shaped the house, transforming both its architectural appearance and its social role.

While these women's biographies reflect the gender politics of their times, their story is not a simple one of progress towards emancipation and equality. Nancy, in the 20th century, was more financially reliant on her husband than Elizabeth Villiers was in the 17th. In the early 19th century Harriet, Duchess of Sutherland, watched from the balcony of the Lords as an act passed into law that would formally prevent women from participating in parliamentary elections – a privilege that had been enjoyed by women burgesses in the Tudor period. The life of each mistress is a dance of progress and reaction, of old and new. In this way, the biographies are not dissimilar from the house itself, where past and present are woven together: where 20th-century wiring runs underground along 16th-century tunnels, service bells from the 19th century hang from the wall above Wi-Fi boxes, and a swimming pool from the 1950s sits within a garden landscaped in the 1700s.

On the opposite side of the house to the pool, between the main block and the east wing, lies an unusual monument from the early 20th century that commemorates an event from the late 17th. Carved into the grass, inlaid in brickwork, is a rapier with an elegant handle, the sort a gentleman would have used in a duel. Alongside it lies a date: 1668.

It is a monument to the day on which a duel was fought between two of the most powerful people in the land, the Duke of Buckingham and the Earl of Shrewsbury. They were fighting for one woman – Anna Maria – Shrewsbury's wife and Buckingham's lover. The duel was to the death. Buckingham killed Shrewsbury and claimed Anna Maria as his prize. She became the first mistress of this great house, and it is to her that I turn to begin my story.

PART I

ANNA MARIA

1642-1702

Chapter 1

THE DUEL

BARN ELMS, 16 JANUARY 1668

IN THE THIN light of a January morning, the Duke of Buckingham galloped towards Barn Elms, the appointed site for the duel he had so long awaited. In springtime and summer, revellers flocked to Barn Elms with their bottles, baskets and chairs, recorded the diarist Samuel Pepys, ‘to sup under the trees, by the waterside’, but in winter the ground next to the Thames was frozen and deserted. Nevertheless, there was still activity on the river.¹ Nearby Putney was famous for its fishery and was also the point at which travellers going west from London disembarked from the ferry and continued by coach.² The harried cries of watermen and the shouts of fishermen returning from dawn trips filled the air as Buckingham neared his destination.

The grounds of the old manor of Barn Elms lay on a curve in the river just west of Putney. The land was divided into narrow agricultural plots – some open, others fenced off by walls or hedgerows. Pepys recorded that the duel took place in a ‘close’, meaning a yard next to a building or an enclosed field – somewhere screened off from passers-by.³

But as his horse’s hoofs thundered along the icy riverbank, Buckingham’s thoughts lay on a more distant turf. Anna Maria, the woman who had provoked the duel, was 270 miles away, in self-imposed exile in a convent in France. Nine years before, in 1659, Anna Maria Brudenell

had married Francis Talbot, 11th Earl of Shrewsbury, but the union had been an unhappy one. He was 36, a wealthy but sedate landowner; she was a pleasure-loving 16-year-old already conscious of her seductive charms. Anna Maria kept a series of lovers but Shrewsbury turned a blind eye, making himself a laughing stock at court. During a trip to York in 1666, she began a new affair, this time with the flamboyant courtier George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham, and the following summer sexual rivalry between him and another of her paramours, the hot-headed rake Henry Killigrew, exploded in a violent scuffle.⁴ This very public fracas made it abundantly clear that Anna Maria had been serially unfaithful, and Shrewsbury's failure to challenge either man to a duel was seen as a dereliction of his role as a noble husband. Anna Maria fled to France in shame.

Amid reports that Buckingham was actually hiding Anna Maria in England, Shrewsbury at last summoned the courage to defend his marriage and his name. He challenged Buckingham to a duel and the duke eagerly accepted. Anna Maria exerted an extraordinary hold over a great number of men but she quite simply possessed the duke. 'Love is like Moses' serpent,' he lamented in his commonplace book, 'it devours all the rest.'⁵

Pepys reported that King Charles II had tried to dissuade Buckingham from fighting the duel but the message was never received.⁶ Even if it had been delivered, Buckingham would probably have taken little heed of the king's wishes. Charles II was more like his brother than his monarch. Buckingham's father, also George Villiers, had been made a duke by Charles I and, when Villiers senior was assassinated in 1628, the king took the Buckingham children into his household. Young George became a close friend of the future king and many of Charles's happiest childhood memories involved Buckingham. The pair spent

their student days at Cambridge University and their names appear side by side in the records of matriculation at Trinity College.⁷ Buckingham felt little obligation to defer to the king, while Charles tended to turn a blind eye to Buckingham's reckless conduct.

Unknown to Shrewsbury, Buckingham had another reason to be riding to Barn Elms that January day in 1668. Shortly after the start of his affair with Anna Maria, Buckingham had viewed a magnificent estate next to the Thames. The site, then owned by the Manfield family, was within easy boating distance of London and included two hunting lodges set in 160 acres of arable land and woods. The estate was known as Cliveden, or Cliffden, after the chalk cliffs that rose above the river. From the lodges the ground dropped sharply towards the Thames, and on the far side of the river flooded water meadows and open land spread out for miles beyond. There had once been a well-stocked deer park on the site and Buckingham knew he could restore the estate to its former glory. He intended to replace the lodge with a large house that would boast the best views in the kingdom.

Buckingham bought Cliveden with the pleasures of the flesh at the forefront of his mind. This, he fantasised, would be his grand love nest with Anna Maria, a place for them to freely indulge in their affair – hunting by day, dancing by night. It was Buckingham's obsession with Anna Maria and his dream of a gilded life with her at Cliveden that led him to accept Shrewsbury's challenge.

Buckingham's fight with Shrewsbury was not to be an impulsive brawl of the sort seen every night across London's streets and taverns, but a carefully calibrated episode of violence. Although there had been medieval precedents for settling disputes through combat, the duel of honour was essentially a Renaissance invention, imported from Italy. Duelling formalised conflicts between