

Law and disorder of the Bath

He's 65 next month, but the peer with a penchant for polygamy still dreams of siring children on the wrong side of the blanket

THE AIR is close with the smell of sweaty old feet and unwashed plates. He has stained bedsheets, pillows with red hearts, lopsided posters of Monet and Manet, screaming pink, yellow and red paint work and a cupboard full of blouses with flounces, frills, embroidery and twirls. It could be a bohemian student squat. But his doorbell on the Fifties block states simply "Bath".

This is the London home of the 7th Marquess of Bath, Alexander Thynn, 64, dubbed the Loins of Longleat in reference to his multifarious romantic interests and the safari lions at his £150 million, 10,000 acre Elizabethan stately home in Wiltshire. As well as polygamy — he has had a wifelet for every year of his life — he is known for his pantheism and regionalism.

At Longleat, he is building a Star Trek-style banqueting hall with flying saucers and other sci-fi trappings; has commissioned Thynnhenge, a full size replica of Stonehenge for concerts; paints murals of ancestors' and wifelets' heads; opened Oscar's nightclub; and offers satellite television to his gorillas. "One plays up every gimmick to make people visit," says Lord Bath.

He's a lolling bear of a man in bare feet, wearing a party shirt, earring, long grey hair beard and endearingly friendly and diffident look. He has pale blue eyes, a kind face, crinkles his nose expressively and turns his head when I talk because he's somewhat deaf.

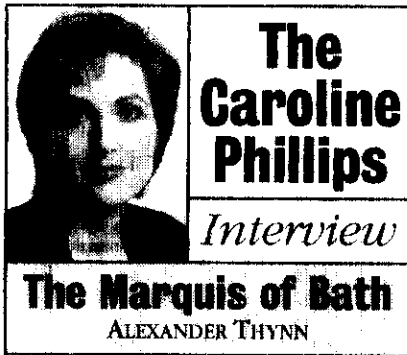
He speaks lengthily, waveringly and with curious emphasis as in, "Would you drink a bit of sherry aw-wah vodka?" It's Ham and he reappears with his own large tumbler spilling over with red wine, refilling it instantly each time it's finished. "I've halved the amount I drink since my doctor told me my liver was swollen and I'd get cirrhosis," he says.

Much has happened in his life recently. "We haven't met since before 1992 when his father, the 6th Marquess of Bath, died. There was much enmity between the two and he felt rejected by his father whom he felt doubted his abilities. "I feel a lot of freedom since he died. I don't feel I have to tip-toe around any longer," says Lord Bath. "But I don't want to dwell on his death because I smoulder with anger when I think of things he left to be discovered after he died." He refuses resolutely to elaborate.

He says the funeral of his brother, Valentine, who committed suicide was far sadder. "He hung himself with a bedspread during the great drought in 1976. I'd bailed him out of his substantial gambling debts. The third time his business went wrong and his marriage failed, he felt he wasn't so good at life."

LORD Bath's views were diametrically opposed to his father's. Lord Bath is a Liberal Democrat. But his father was a Fascist, collected Hitleriana and considered Hitler a good person. "He really admired Hitler's ruthlessness, liked Hitler and hated democracy. How did his father view the Holocaust?" He was anti-Semitic," Lord Bath exhales. "He used to say, 'Do we really believe it was as bad as they said?' and, 'What's a few million Jews?' He looks horribly uncomfortable.

On a lesser note, since last we met Lord Bath was in court last June, fined £500 for assault. "I was dressed in a party suit (red sequin with mirrors) and an overcoat in the street was grossly



The Caroline Phillips

Interview

The Marquis of Bath
ALEXANDER THYNN

offensive to me," he says. "He gesticulated and called out, 'you pseud, you pseud'."

Later Lord Bath saw the man he thought to be his assailant. "He looked guilty as he walked by, so I gave him a couple of cuffs and he looked about to punch, so I punched him," he says. "It's awful that he turned out to be the wrong man. I heard afterwards that he was deaf and hadn't even heard me." Lord Bath has hit people before for being abusive. "If it had been the right person, I feel it would have been the correct response." Was he suffering from paranoia? "That's irrelevant."

HE HAS also had problems with Ceawlin (pronounced Saw-lin), Viscount Weymouth, his 22-year-old son and heir. Last April Viscount Weymouth lost his girlfriend and best friend in an explosion in a New Delhi hostel. He suffered a dislocated neck vertebra and acute emotional distress and decided to abandon his university degree. "He shut himself off emotionally and has been vague and virtually listless since the accident. Now he's showing signs of improving."

Lord Bath has been married to Anna Gael, a Hungarian journalist, for 28 years. "I date our marriage from when we started living together, 38 years ago. In those initial 10 years she married a Frenchman, but I don't ever count that." So why did he marry Anna? "I was 37 and beginning to worry greatly that I was unmarriageable, particularly once I stated my views on family." (On polygamy and wanting an extended family with lots of children by his wifelets.)

"We had a good relationship, despite her being married. So I said, 'Can we not get something going where we're at least getting some sons and heirs? Once we're over that hurdle, we can think later about how we get the rest of the relationship working.'" He finishes his third tumbler of wine. "Our relationship is very fierce sometimes. When she was young she threw things at me, on one occasion Russian porcelain of some value from Longleat." They co-habit one week in London and the rest of the time the marchioness lives in Paris. "It would be difficult for me to be under the strain of living with her all the time."

He likes to have six wifelets on his estate, but currently has only one. "Anna's tolerant when she meets someone I know well, but prefers not to. I like the idea of a family where they all get on and one is not having to be all things to one person." Curiously, over a 30-year span, he hasn't produced the illegitimate children he desires. "This is a failure. But when I read my journals, I see the time put in by a girl trying to get pregnant



LORD OF MISRULE: Master of Longleat, a £150 million stately home, Lord Bath is content to fill his bohemian London flat with nondescript posters

Picture: DOUGLAS MORRISON

is actually very small." He says, laughingly, that he's oversexed. "Truthfully I'd be kept from feeling randy by having sex twice a week. But I wouldn't be worried if I went a week without." He smiles. "Three in the bed wasn't that rare. But I've never had the number I'd have liked."

This is an odd environment in which to have raised his children Lenka, 27, and an associate producer, and Ceawlin, whose job is "exploring financial development". They lived at Longleat even when the marchioness was in Paris. "It was difficult getting nannies. We'd offer them the job and they'd turn us down." What was the effect of his wifelets on his children? "I don't think Anna ever told them it was ideal." Does he really think that his was the model way to bring up children? "I'd say one of the ideal ways," he says, tersely.

When Ceawlin left his comprehensive school and went to Bedales, Lord Bath was upset. Then he was expelled for

smoking cannabis. "It wasn't mine, but I dare say it belonged to someone who'd been staying." Lord Bath had instructed his children about the drugs he has tried. "LSD when I was writing my novel and needed to make the lord into a drug addict, and I'll smoke pot and take cocaine and mahjoun which is like jam from Morocco." Lord Bath worries about what Ceawlin will do when he inherits Longleat: "He hopes he'll be wealthy enough not to have to have the public."

LORD Bath's own childhood wasn't pleasant. He was bought up by nannies in a remote part of the house. "My childhood was boring." He recalls being beaten, aged 15, by his father for washing the dog on the linoleum. His mother is Daphne Fielding (she wrote The Duchess of Jermyn Street) and his parents divorced when he was 21. "My mother had other relationships then my father started having them. It was frictional." Nonetheless, he

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showed promise at Eton — where he was a member of the elite prefect society Pop — and as an officer in the Life Guards, then read PPE at Oxford, graduating with a third.

He became unconventional as a stand against his father. "I was being swept aside by someone who didn't understand anything." Oddly his polygamy probably has its roots in the hurt he felt when his father went off with his stepmother: "He didn't feel he owed us anything, that it was suddenly more convenient to go off with the woman he was in love with," he says, trembling. "I decided I would never make life like that for my children."

All these episodes appear in Lord Bath's autobiography — 11-volumes and over two million words so far; astonishingly, he types all his press cuttings into it — intended for publication once everyone in it is dead. Before writing his autobiography, he commits his thoughts to a journal. "Like a love letter to myself." He shows it to me very reluc-

tantly. The first words I see are "my paranoia". "That relates to my personality. Having been persecuted by my family who didn't see the way I fitted in with them, I keep a good record of it."

IN THE book I find a character called Chris. Could this be Lord Bath's estranged brother, evicted from Longleat on the death of their father? "I suddenly remembered Chris was in the room," it reads, "and might be offended that his wife was flirting with me." Chris then accuses Lord Bath of having conjugal relations with his pug dog. "Oh yes," laughs Lord Bath. "I remember the incident." Next comes, "Running for God, when Alexander discovers he has been resurrected." But it turns out to be just a chapter of one of his novels.

Lord Bath is shrewd, self-absorbed, excitable and articulate. Sincere, intense, affectionate and affable. But is he mad? "I don't think there's a question to answer."