



SALAD DAYS

LORD ASTOR SHARES CHILDHOOD MEMORIES WITH CAROLINE PHILLIPS,
TALES OF DINNER WITH MACMILLAN AND SWIMMING IN THE THAMES

“I was very sad to leave Cliveden,” says William Waldorf Astor, the fourth Viscount. In 1942 his grandfather gave the estate to the National Trust, but the family continued to live there until they found it too difficult, about which more later. Thus Lord Astor spent his first 16 years living at Cliveden, his family home, and a house with a political history - from the Dukes of Buckingham to the Astors.

And, of course, it was where John Profumo, then Secretary of State for War, met party girl Christine Keeler frolicking in the Cliveden swimming pool - leading to the Profumo affair, Britain's most infamous political sex scandal. Lord Astor, then aged 10, never experienced any pool naughtiness. “Whenever I swam, and Stephen Ward and his girlfriends came to the pool, Nanny Greene, large and in full uniform, sternly presided. No bad behaviour got past her.”

We are sitting on the House of Lords' Terrace, eating scones and clotted cream and watching Duck boats pass us by on the Thames. Lord Astor is one in a long line of Williams - his family boasts five consecutive males with that name. “It is very simple,”

he claims. “My grandfather was known as Waldorf, my father was Bill, I am William, my son is Will and my grandson is Waldorf. I asked my father, ‘Why did you keep it?’ And he replied, ‘Can you imagine having to change the initials on everything?’”

His grandmother Nancy (from Virginia) was the first woman MP to take her seat. His Uncle David was erstwhile proprietor/editor of The Observer. His family also owned The Times. Additionally he is Prime Minister David Cameron's (step) father-in-law. His wife Annabel is the brains behind OKA, the interior design group. And the Astor family also supplied two bridesmaids at the wedding of Prince William.

Lord Astor, 62, is a politician and a hugely successful businessman: formally a minister in Margaret Thatcher's and John Major's governments, he is now an elected hereditary peer and Deputy Chairman of Silvergate Media, a TV production and licensing company.

But back to Cliveden. “Life at Cliveden was a series of contrasts. There was the grand life: from the age of seven, my father insisted that I join him at dinner and learn to



Cliveden House is much the same



Winston Churchill



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SHE ASKED WHAT MY MIDDLE NAME WAS. 'WALDORF,' I REPLIED. SHE THOUGHT FOR A LONG TIME THEN SAID, 'WHY DID YOUR PARENTS NAME YOU AFTER A SALAD?'

make polite conversation with international guests, various friends of my grandmother, and politicians such as Harold Macmillan, then Prime Minister... And there was the simple life: I loved exploring the garden, riding bicycles and swimming in the cold Thames with my three half-sisters."

So why did his family leave Cliveden when he was 17? (His father died in 1966 when Lord Astor was only 15.)

"It became increasingly difficult having 100,000 people traipsing round one's garden. One felt rather hemmed in. It got to the point that we had to finish lunch early because people wanted to see the dining room. It simply was not going to work in the long term."

Until then, was he a Little Lord Fauntleroy? "We had a butler called Mr Washington, footman, various maids, and housekeepers. All of whom had to be treated with the greatest respect by us children. Woe betide us if we ever forgot to say please or thank you. And there was a wonderful old boy called Sailor who did the fires every day. The heating was coal, so he had to shovel it in the hoppers to keep the boilers going. We often had cold water.

"It is much the same now as when we lived there except the main dining room was our

drawing room. It was also an ordinary life. School and then home, where my playmates were the estate workers' children. My best friend was the chauffeur's son.

"It was also curiously cosmopolitan. There were three Hungarian families living on the estate. My father helped them get out when the Russians invaded in 1956.

"Our lifestyle was sometimes almost frugal. Certainly there was nothing oligarch-like about it. Foreign holidays were rare. At Christmas you might get a new saddle for your pony. My father's generation was born into huge wealth, but there was a sense of duty, that they had to do something good with their money, politics or newspapers or whatever, that came from Waldorf's and Nancy's Christian Science beliefs."

Ah, Lady Astor. The woman renowned for her wit and sharp tongue. Winston Churchill reportedly told her that having a woman in Parliament was like having one intrude on him in the bathroom. "You are not," she shot back, "handsome enough to have such fears." Another time Lady Astor said to Churchill, "If you were my husband, I would poison your tea." "Madam," he responded, "If you were my wife, I would drink it!"

"She was naughty and eccentric. She would take people on and be quite aggressive,"

says Lord Astor. "If they stood up to her, she thought them wonderful. Otherwise they were finished."

She was a doting grandmother, but made life "difficult" for Lord Astor's father and uncles. "She made it a principle not to like her daughters-in-law until they got divorced!"

Lady Astor also introduced Christian Science to the household. "She never went to a doctor, never drank alcohol. If one was ever feeling ill, one got an hour's Bible reading or something from Mary Baker Eddy (founder of the movement). I am never sure whether it was mind over matter or divine intervention but somehow it worked."

His is a family with a great legacy. The Astors once had so much real estate that they were known as the Landlords of New York. What is it like having American hotels, buildings, roads and entire districts named after his family, from the Waldorf-Astoria to Astoria in Queens, New York? "It doesn't mean much, but I remember taking a girl out to dinner in New York when I was young. She asked what my middle name was. 'Waldorf,' I replied. She thought for a long time then said, 'Why did your parents name you after a salad?'" And he roars with laughter again. "I didn't like to mention that the salad was named after us."