

# Wargrave Local History Society

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## Cliveden: power, politics and scandal - Peter Hague

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Wargrave Local History Society resumed its meeting programme after a summer break with a presentation by Peter Hague about Cliveden - the house itself and some of its owners and occupants.



Situated on a hill overlooking the valley of the River Thames near Taplow, Cliveden is a large Italianate country mansion. It had been bought by the first Lord Astor in 1893, and was gifted to the National Trust in 1942 by its then owner, Waldorf Astor, along with a substantial donation - the only condition being that the Astor family could continue to live there. It has long been visited by royalty, prominent politicians, and other notable people. When the former Prime Minister, Harold MacMillan heard that part of the property was to become a hotel, he is reported to have said "It always has been".

Peter began by describing parts of the hotel as it is now-a-days. There are two dining rooms - the main one being what was formerly the drawing room, whilst the smaller one is the original one. This is known as the French Dining Room. (*right*). The name comes from the origin of the panelling on the room's walls. William Astor was in Paris in 1897 when he heard that panels in the Chateau d'Asnieres were being offered for sale. He realised that the proportions exactly matched those of the dining room at Cliveden, so bought them 'lock, stock and barrel'. The room is now mainly used for wedding receptions and other private dining occasions. For those wishing to stay overnight at Cliveden, Peter described the bedrooms as 'sumptuous', adding that the cost per night (pre-covid) was about £1500 - or the entire hotel could be used at that time to accommodate a visitor's entourage for about £75,000 per night.





*George Villiers  
2nd Duke of Buckingham*

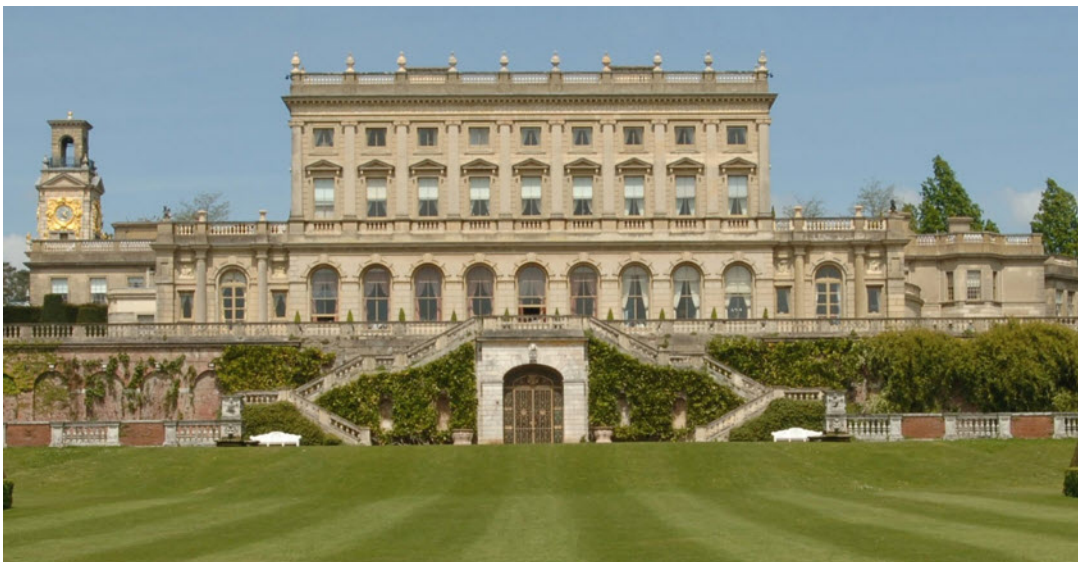
Peter then considered the ownership of Cliveden - starting with George Villiers, the 2nd Duke of Buckingham. He was a wit, who liked eating, drinking, good music and was 'fond of the ladies'. He had married Mary, daughter of Thomas Fairfax, one of Cromwell's generals in 1657. He also spent 4 terms of imprisonment in the Tower of London, one being for fighting in the House of Lords! (his father-in-law had arranged for his release from the Tower on one occasion).

George had Cliveden built for him in 1666, using it as a hunting lodge. He had a long affair with Anna Marie, the Countess of Shrewsbury. In 1668, Anna's husband, Francis Talbot, (somewhat inadvisedly!) challenged George Villiers to a duel (at that time illegal). This took place at Richmond with swords, when Francis was mortally wounded. Subsequently, George Villiers fell from Charles II's favour spending time in France, but in due course returned to Cliveden, where he died in 1686 as the result of a chill he caught whilst out hunting.

The 1st Earl of Orkney, George Hamilton, then acquired Cliveden. He had married Elizabeth Villiers, George Villiers' cousin. She became a lady-in-waiting to William of Orange's wife, Queen Mary - Elizabeth was also said to be the mistress of William. Allegedly, Elizabeth's affair only came to an end when the Queen expressed her wish shortly before she died, when Elizabeth became known as the 'mistress of Cliveden'. George Hamilton had close links to the Royal family, having been a successful military man, and spent most his time following retirement from the army at Cliveden. The Earl of Orkney and his descendants owned Cliveden for about 100 years, although in 1737 it was leased to Frederick, the Prince of Wales. After he died in 1751, the Orkney family moved back into Cliveden - but a serious fire gutted the house soon afterwards.

The next owner was George Warrender, who was said to be fat, pompous, garrulous and short-tempered - but he made good the damage caused to the house by the fire.

In 1849, George Leveson-Gower, the 2nd Duke of Sutherland became the next owner - his wife, Harriet was a close confidante of Queen Victoria, and the Queen and Prince Albert visited Cliveden a number of times. However, late in 1849 another fire struck at Cliveden, again gutting the interior. The Duke and Duchess engaged the architect Charles Barry for the task of rebuilding the house in a neo-classical style. That went well - until the architect submitted his expenses claim, at which point the Duke of Sutherland fired him, and had George Devey and Henry Clutton complete the task.



After the Duke died in 1861, Harriet remained at Cliveden until her death in 1867 - one of the pall-bearers at her funeral being William Gladstone. The 1st Duke of Westminster then bought Cliveden in 1868, and although he owned it for about 25 years, did not live there very much.

When Cliveden came on the market again in 1893, it was purchased by William Waldorf Astor, from a wealthy American family, who had moved to England following a family dispute. He was a prominent politician, publisher, and hotelier. He became a British citizen in 1899, and in recognition of his work during World War 1 (part of the Cliveden estate becoming a Canadian Red Cross Hospital), William was created the 1st Viscount Astor in 1917. When his eldest son, Waldorf, married Nancy Langhorne in 1906, William Astor gave them Cliveden as a wedding present - as well as the Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York. After William died in 1919, Waldorf became the 2nd Viscount Astor, and he and Nancy lived at Cliveden through the 1920s and 1930s.

Nancy was born in Virginia, the 8th of 11 children in the family. Although they were quite poor at that stage, by the time Nancy was in her teens the family had prospered as her father had become involved in the construction, tobacco and railway businesses. Nancy had gone with her sister Irene to a finishing school in New York, where she met, and married, Robert Gould Shaw jnr, and they had a son. However, following her divorce, Nancy came to England, with another sister, Phyllis, and so met and married Waldorf Astor.



*Nancy Astor*

Waldorf was elected as an MP for Plymouth in 1910, and from 1918 represented the constituency of Plymouth Sutton. However, following the death of his father he was elevated to the House of Lords. Nancy took the opportunity to stand for election in his place, and became the first female to take a seat in the House of Commons. She was a vociferous campaigner for women's rights, for prison reform and for the tee-total movement.

Social gatherings at Cliveden included many prominent people, including George V and Queen Mary, and George VI and Queen Elizabeth, with the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret. By the end of the 1930s, the gatherings were seen as having a more serious purpose, and the people who met there were known as the "Cliveden Set". They included politicians and press barons - and many were seen as being appeasers of Hitler's Nazi regime. Other guests at Cliveden did include Nazi sympathisers, but also people such as Franklin D Roosevelt, Mahatma Gandhi, Winston Churchill, George Bernard Shaw, Rudyard Kipling and Charlie Chaplin - who had a great dislike of the Nazi party. Nancy seemed to like to invite people of different points of view to promote discussion.

Although the house had been gifted to the National Trust, and Waldorf had died in 1952, Nancy continued to live there until her death in 1964, and Cliveden continued to attract politicians, entertainers, and other well-known personalities.

This led to an event that made national headlines in 1963. Amongst those visitors was John Profumo MP, then the Minister of War, and Stephen Ward, an osteopath who had up-market clients, including members of the aristocracy, including the then Lord Astor. Although Stephen Ward had a property in Wimpole Mews in London, Lord Astor offered him a property on the Cliveden estate, along with use of the swimming pool. Living at the Wimpole Mews house were two girls who worked at Murray's Cabaret club in London as top-less dancers - Christine Keeler and Mandy Rice-Davies.

The two girls also worked as prostitutes - one of Christine Keeler's clients being Eugene Ivanov - who was a Russian spy. Whilst Christine Keeler and Stephen Ward were at the swimming pool, Lord Astor and John Profumo came out from a party at Cliveden House. John Profumo therefore got to know Christine Keeler. The fact that Christine Keeler had been in a relationship with both a government minister and a Russian spy was at first denied by John Profumo in the House of Commons, but following newspaper reports about the matter he admitted he had lied, and resigned. Meanwhile, Stephen Ward was arrested and charged with living off immoral earnings. His friends abandoned him, and he took an overdose of barbiturates. Mandy Rice-Davies was not actually involved with John Profumo, but associated with the affair as a 'good-time girl'. She did not wish to give evidence in court, but a dishonest policeman had her put into Holloway prison on a trumped-up charge, arranging for her to be released on condition that she testified in the case. The scandal of the affair rocked Harold Macmillan's government - he remained in power for a while, but the Conservatives were defeated at the general election the following year.



*John Profumo*

(The 4th Viscount Astor reportedly said that the Profumo affair would not have happened if it had not been for a horse called Ambiguity owned by his father. Previously, the children of the family had been taken to the river to swim. When Ambiguity won the Epsom Oaks in 1953, the winnings were used to build the swimming pool).

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