



Camelot on Thames

Bill Gates of Microsoft is the latest in a long line of millionaires to fall for Cliveden. James Fox, who stayed there as a child with his great-aunt Nancy Astor, tells the story of a house that has played a central part in some of the great political intrigues of this century



Cliveden's south front
and terrace with
Borghese balustrade

My first memories of Cliveden, as a very small child, around 1949, were of a darkened palace of silence and gloom. My mother Dinah, Nancy Astor's niece, daughter of her favourite sister Phyllis, had left for America to try to repair her marriage. I was billeted, with my only sister and a nurse, in a room on the top floor overlooking the gravel drive. Confused about time and place, I remember the enormous yew hedges, the miles of gravel, the doleful chiming from the clocktower, and fear of the 'nightwatchman' who walked passages in the dark hours.

I remember Nancy's husband Waldorf, then toward the end of his life, emerging from his own sunless east wing to which he had banished himself, wrapped in a blanket – alpaca, I later discovered – driving his electric wheelchair. In this new invention he was liberated to tour the grounds, to inspect his beloved Cliveden woods. A hooter had been fitted: it had once broken down leaving him stranded for many hours on some outreach of the 375-acre estate.

Four years earlier Waldorf had dissuaded Nancy, who had been the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons, from standing for Plymouth in the 1945 election. It had been clear, even before the war, that she was losing her balance, becoming raucous and inaccurate and getting the worst of exchanges in the House. She turned on him with merciless venom, and never forgave him for withdrawing his support. From then on, Nancy avoided spending time with Waldorf in the same house; she would go to Sandwich when he was at Cliveden. When she was there he would go to Jura, on the west coast of Scotland. Eventually he would go to stay with his sons rather than face her 'lambasting'.

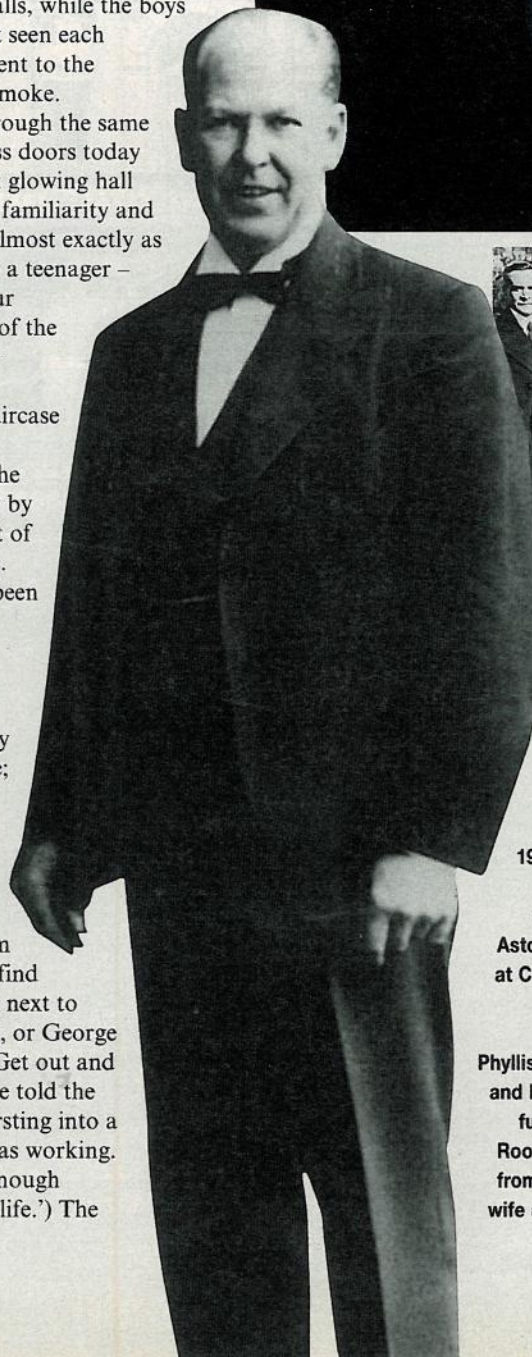
The house and its entertainment lightened up somewhat after Waldorf died in 1952. Before she finally retired to her houses at Sandwich and Hill Street in London, Nancy stayed on briefly at Cliveden with her eldest Astor son, Bill, who loved entertaining and who revived, near enough, its pre-war standards, although on a more 'domestic' scale. In that period there were wild games, in the woods and on the beautiful parterre behind the house.

Visiting Cliveden 40 years on, I remembered the brambles on the far edge of the parterre into which a gang of us pushed a young nurserymaid. It is an action whose guilt has never left me. I remember her tears as clearly today as if it were yesterday. I realise now why she was so frightened – another push and she might well have tumbled 250 feet into the Thames.

I remember, too, the alarm and excitement that Nancy still created, her commanding presence at the head of the table in the green and gold Louis XV rococo dining-room where she had performed for so many years, picking on people down the table to liven up her act. Her greetings and admonishments were often brusque: 'Where've you bin? Hold your shoulders up', 'Stop squealin'. You're talkin' like a lunatic'. It was hard to know then that this was her form of friendly communication. To one of my playmates she said, simply, poking him in the chest, 'I hear you're a horrible little boy.' He turned against her for ever.

It was in my teens that I began to take in this extraordinary house and its 18th-century gardens. I would come with my mother, by then remarried, on trips from Eton when Bill Astor would give large parties for the Fourth of July. I remembered the old nerves of these visits, faced with the social rampage of its gatherings, the awkwardness of the gawky debutantes in their starched hats, bored and speechless, sitting around exhausted from late-night balls, while the boys – as if they hadn't seen each other enough – went to the billiard room to smoke.

But walking through the same wood-framed glass doors today and into the great glowing hall revived a thrill of familiarity and excitement. It is almost exactly as it was when I was a teenager – the suits of armour standing in front of the exquisite Brussels tapestries, the flagstones, the staircase with its carved wooden figures, the portrait of Nancy by Sargent to the left of the huge fireplace. This had always been the arena for Nancy's entertainment, in the Twenties and Thirties, especially at Christmas time; of the 'Bedouin encampment' of her tea parties for 40 or 50, when obscure functionaries from Plymouth would find themselves sitting next to Cabinet ministers, or George Bernard Shaw. ('Get out and go for a walk,' she told the ancient Shaw, bursting into a room where he was working. 'You've written enough nonsense in your life.') The



Clockwise from left, Mr Lee, the butler at Cliveden from 1912 to 1960; the French dining-room; Lord and Lady Astor and children at Christmas 1921; James Fox's grandmother Phyllis; Waldorf (left) and Nancy with the future President Roosevelt (second from right) and his wife and eldest son



'Nancy Astor would pick on people down the dining-room table to liven up her act'

kind, wise, flawless man of great balance, who treated everyone alike with tact and respect. For me, as a teenager, he had the look of some grand European statesman of the stature of Adenauer or de Gaulle, and if you met him on one of his walks in the grounds, dressed in his tailored tweed suit, carrying his shotgun, you might have mistaken him for one.

When a regular guest of the old days visited Mr Lee in his retirement and asked him what he thought of *Upstairs, Downstairs*, he replied, 'Not quite our style, was it Sir?' He would have been too grand to say the same about the hotel which the house has now become, although the staff try, and with some success, to emulate his style.

Waldorf Astor originally gave Cliveden to the National Trust in 1942, with an endowment and the agreement that Astors could live there for as long as they wished. Nancy died in 1964, her son Bill prematurely two years later. The Trust leased Cliveden to Stanford University as an overseas campus, then in 1985 to the hotel group, now Cliveden Ltd, which has created from it perhaps the most luxurious hotel in Europe, certainly in Britain.

On our stay in December, the view of the parterre from our large and beautiful room was obscured by a heavy morning fog hanging over Cliveden Reach. It was barely worth going out. But taking a walk eventually on this ghostly, dank day, I found myself at the Octagonal Temple at the top of the cliff above the Thames, trying the cold steel door, dripping with condensation, behind which Nancy is buried beside Waldorf.

Bobbie Shaw, her son by her first marriage, the funniest member of his family and best loved among his siblings, is buried there, too. I remember him in his garb of the Soho demi-monde of the Fifties, his Woodbine cigarettes, which he kept in a Fabergé cigarette case. He kept up a constant undercurrent of inspired bitching at his mother's table; indeed, to my ears he seemed startlingly rude, able to say, apparently with impunity, in what sounded like a cockney accent, 'Oh, Mother, do shut up.' He had once been an officer in the Blues – the Royal Horse Guards – and a famous steeplechase rider. He had been jailed for a homosexual offence in 1931, and never recovered either from that or the tragic over-possessiveness of Nancy and he had eventually committed suicide. 'I suppose you all think you're misunderstood,' Nancy once told a gathering of her children. 'We gave that up long ago,' Bobbie replied on their behalf, 'all we want is a bit of civility.' The combination of cold, and the silence, the locked door, the blurred sight of funerary furniture and



two strongest elements of continuity in this house, whose ghosts were palpably present, were Edwin Lee, the greatest butler of his time – his pantry area to the right of the door – and the first footman, Arthur Bushell. They were always there to greet you – as they had been there to greet my grandfather Bob Brand before the First World War, and my mother in the Thirties.

In the early Sixties, if the house was unoccupied, I would bicycle over from school, cranking up my courage, to ask Mr Lee if I could use the pool. They are famous men, remembered as much as any of the stars who came to Cliveden. Both had fought in the First World War, Bushell rising to the rank of lieutenant, both men giving proof that it is the NCOs who really run the Army, since that is what it was also like running the military campaigns of Cliveden entertainment.

Arthur Bushell was particularly famous for his annual performance at the servants' ball when he would dress up in drag and do his imitation of Lady Desborough, Nancy's first social rival and neighbour at Taplow Court, which each year reduced his audience of Cliveden employees to helpless laughter. Mr Lee, whom Nancy came to call 'Lord Lee of Cliveden', was a

mosaic through the stained glass, gave me a terrible feeling of trespassing on spirits, a reminder of how remote and dead, after only a few years, the great days of Cliveden are, how speedily the past floats off into a series of locked and unvisited mausoleums.

'Here we are with no servants,' Nancy Astor wrote from Cliveden in 1906. 'They all went with Mr Astor except the butler, who went mad!' Nancy, then 27, was writing to my grandmother, Phyllis, soon after Nancy married Waldorf Astor. The couple had been given Cliveden as a wedding present by Waldorf's father, William Waldorf, in 1906 – a fantastic inheritance. The original house was built on chalk cliffs with an exceptional view over the Thames by the 2nd Duke of Buckingham in the mid 17th century; it was rebuilt in the 18th century by the 1st Earl of Orkney, who laid out the garden with its intersecting rides and its long lime avenue. The house burned down and was rebuilt, by Sir Charles Barry in 1850, for the 2nd Duke of Sutherland. Its enduring historical fame and attraction, and its power, lay partly in its proximity to London and Windsor Castle and its sealed-off privacy.

THE MOST eccentric member of a family lurching increasingly in that direction, William Waldorf had bought the house, then owned by the Duke of Westminster, in 1893, as a place where he could settle down to be a Great Man, for which his wealth was his only qualification. He was considered the richest man in the world. His great grandfather, John Jacob the 1st, had died in 1848, the year he was born, leaving a fortune of \$25 million made from the fur business and trade with China. William Waldorf, who had inherited the biggest share, was collecting \$9 million a year from rents in Manhattan, in whose real estate John Jacob had invested. But William had turned his back on America, humiliated in an attempt to get elected for Congress. He suffered from debilitating depressions, loneliness, paranoia, all made worse by the death of his wife, Mary, in 1894. At Cliveden he left behind, for the young Astors, his extraordinary hoard of great works of European art. He moved to Hever Castle in Kent, his *residence secondaire*, the house of Anne Boleyn, where he had built a moated Tudor village within which his occasional guests were locked at night.

The butler who came with his gift to Nancy and Waldorf, released from his employer's obsessive regime of formality and punctuality at Cliveden, from serving him endless solitary six-course meals, had taken to the port vintages in the cellar, a rapid route to

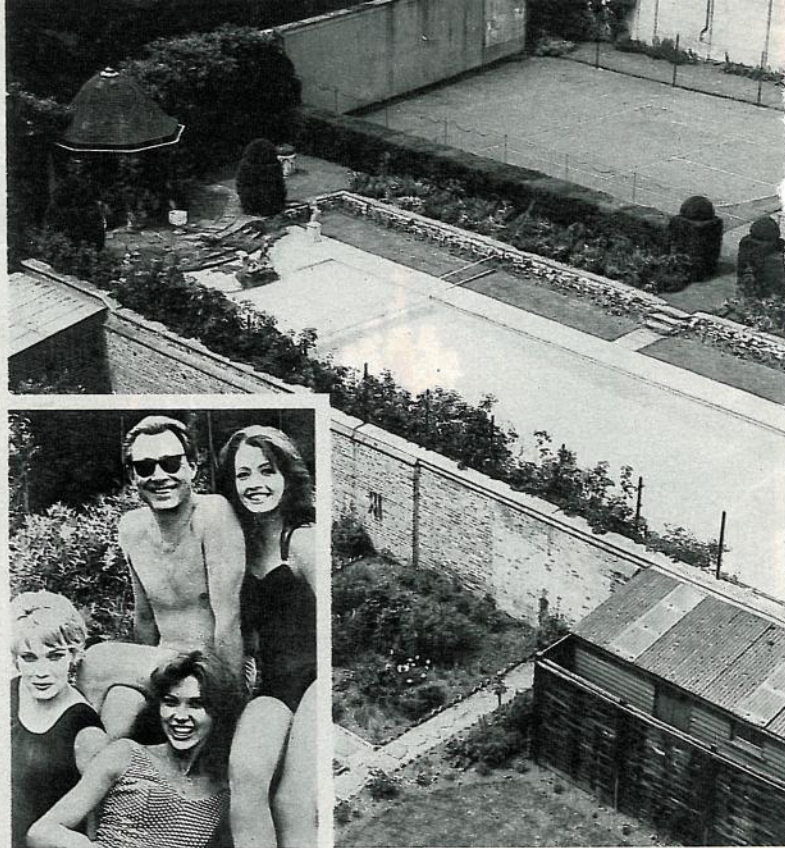
Lethe. You can now hire that very cellar, with its vaulted brick arches, for private dinner parties.

Nancy confided only to Phyllis, in her letters, that her own depression almost outweighed her elation at her arrival at this Camelot on the Thames. She felt overwhelmed by her change in fortune, by having married into the Astor clan with their unlimited wealth. She was exaggerating about the lack of servants – a skeleton staff was left, brought up to strength in a matter of weeks. The inside and outside staff totalled some 100 employees, including two maids in the stillroom (for making bread), six housemaids, six laundry maids, Nancy's lady's maid, an 'odd-man', a house carpenter and an electrician. There was also a coachman, a chauffeur and 12 stablehands. They inherited Mr Camm, a great gardener of his time, with between 40 and 50 men under him. There were so many staff Nancy couldn't understand the exact functions of them all, or decipher in which part of the house some slept.

Despite her panic at her surroundings, Nancy wrote to Phyllis in spring 1907, 'The woods are like fairyland. Primroses, violets and the new leaves everywhere. It's really a beautiful place... Camm has small apple trees decorating the house and strawberries twice a day v. delicious ones. Oh Phyl, if you could only be here.'

Being the chatelaine of Cliveden never calmed Nancy's insecurities about money. She never lost her memories of her parents' struggle on the breadline in Virginia's devastated post-civil war economy before her father, Chillie Langhorne, made his sudden fortune on the railroads when she was in her early teens. She used Waldorf's own fortune to conquer Edwardian society – it took her less than two years – and for the next 40 years she ruled here as its brilliant and recklessly incautious hostess. With her wit and cheek and the roaring entertainment she moved rapidly and methodically through the landed aristocracy and Royalty, to the literary world, finally to the intellectuals such as my grandfather Bob Brand, who eventually married Phyllis.

The real heyday of Cliveden was the Twenties and Thirties, after Nancy, having first entered Parliament in 1919, had become the most famous woman in the world. In these years of Chancellors and Prime Ministers, tennis players and generals, movie stars and aviators, of regular lunches and dinners for 30 or 40 people, Nancy ruled Cliveden like some inspired ringmaster, enslaving those about her, generating as much outrage as pleasure, making the most unlikely friends in such figures as Shaw, Charlie Chaplin and Sean O'Casey. When Harold Macmillan was told Cliveden



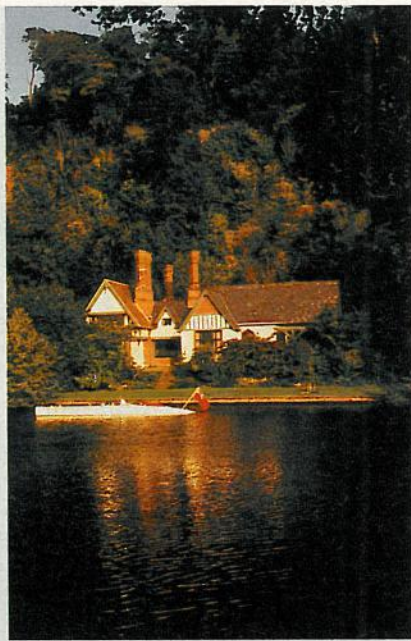
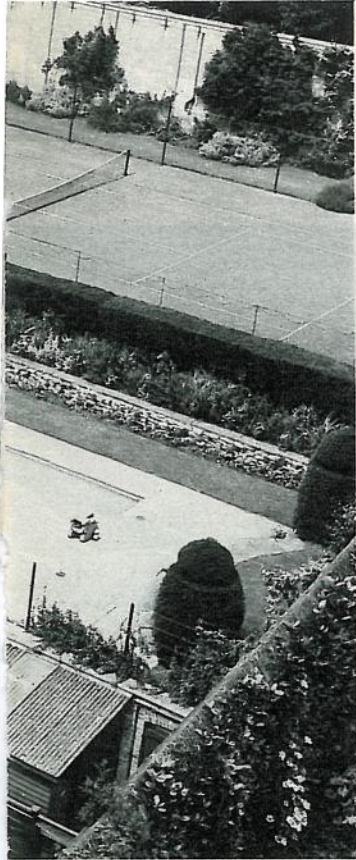
Clockwise from above, Stephen Ward at Cliveden with bathing party guests including call-girl Christine Keeler (right); pictured in 1963 at the height of the scandal, the swimming-pool where John Profumo met Keeler; Spring Cottage on the Cliveden estate, rented to Ward; Keeler and Mandy Rice-Davies, another of Ward's Cliveden 'girls', leaving the Old Bailey during the trial of Ward

had become a hotel, he replied, 'But my dear boy, it always has been.'

But politics, and political intrigue, reform and high mindedness of a kind disappeared from politics, dominated the Cliveden weekends. The Astors owned the *Observer*, edited by the powerful J.L. Garvin, and Waldorf's brother owned *The Times*. Waldorf espoused the radical Unionist cause, often siding with the Liberal Prime Minister Lloyd George, who had become a frequent guest since before the First World War. Cliveden was a powerhouse of Establishment networking which attracted every political luminary across the party divide. The visitors' book lists them all – Asquith, Balfour, Bonar Law, Baldwin, Chamberlain, Churchill. Nancy was against drink, although wine was served at her dinner parties – she could hardly have entertained the likes of Churchill without it. She advertised her variously grown-up children, in the late Thirties, as examples of how high spirits could be had without alcohol. She never knew that the top floor at Cliveden, where their rooms were, was a network of speakeasies that opened up soon after tea, her children arriving down to dinner often in livelier spirits than she expected, ready to take her on but never getting the better of her.

She ruled her family with an overweening control and possessiveness that she always confused with love, eventually driving her children away from her. I think of her standing at the front door as her son, David Astor, aged 19, finally left home after a titanic struggle for his independence. Nancy's remark as he departed was typical of her quick imagination, her touch of genius. 'If you see your mother,' she told him, 'do give her my regards. I hear she's a very charming woman.'

Nancy never took in quite how



damaging the 'Cliveden Set' smear of the late Thirties had been to her reputation, mostly because she knew that the accusations – of Cliveden being the centre of a conspiracy of arch appeasement to Hitler – weren't true. At a moment of disbelief and panic after the invasion of Czechoslovakia, a scapegoat was needed. Since then Nancy and Cliveden have been exonerated by historians. But the legend, and the rumour, sticks to this day. Luckily Nancy was also too old – it was a year before she died – to take in the next wave of calumny that broke over Cliveden, in 1963, under the tenure of Bill Astor.

Through a wooden door between the vast herbaceous borders in the Cliveden forecourt stands the swimming-pool – barely recognisable to me now with its 'Pavilion Spa' built alongside. It was here in July 1961 that John Profumo, then Secretary of State for War, a guest of Bill Astor, was first introduced to Christine Keeler, a 19-year-old call-girl, by the fashionable osteopath Stephen Ward. It was two years later that the revelation of Keeler's parallel friendship with

'I saw Stephen Ward driving a group of flashy girls, clearly showing off'

Captain Ivanov of the Soviet GRU nearly brought down the Macmillan Government, caused Ward's suicide as he was hounded on trumped-up charges and led to Profumo's lifelong banishment from politics.

Profumo was certainly part of the old-style Cliveden gatherings of power and the Establishment that Bill had consciously revived. The other guests that weekend included Lord Mountbatten, President Ayub Khan of Pakistan, various peers, an Oxford don, an Eton schoolmaster.

Stephen Ward, who treated Bill Astor for persistent back ailments, had been given the rental of Spring Cottage by the river on the estate and lived only on the fringes of this world. But Bill liked the convenience of the resident osteopath. He would take weekend guests on walks to the river, as they remember, and there Ward's girls would invariably be, lolling about beside the Thames.

Ward, in turn, would wander up to Cliveden, picking his moment. He never 'lived off immoral earnings' – he was never a pimp, as he was charged and prosecuted. A deeply unpleasant, manipulating figure, who longed for social power and importance, he used these girls as an instrument of social climbing, possibly for future blackmail. Bill's worst, and only crime, in family memory, was to have had the bad judgment to have someone like Ward, who everyone could see was trouble, close by, therefore bringing down shame on the family name.

It could have been only a month before the pool introduction when, over from Eton, I saw Stephen Ward in an open car, driving a group of flashy girls down the drive. My aunt Virginia who, like almost everyone else who ventured into Harley Street, as it seemed, was a patient of Ward, said disapprovingly, 'Rather a fast lot' as they slowly drove by, the dark-glassed Ward, who resembled Jack Nicholson in my memory, clearly showing off.

To this day no one in my extended family knows what was really going on, except that there was never any truth in the idea that Cliveden was a centre for louche entertainment. With the hundreds of guests that Bill Astor entertained, and the staff to gossip, it would have soon got out in the white heat of that hottest of all scandals. The only 'evidence', on which the press fed until all the bones were bleached and abandoned, came from Keeler's own lurid, paid-up and forever self-contradicting stories in the tabloids which centred on that summer evening when Bill's guests, including Profumo, strolling out after dinner, walked in on Ward's bathing party, who were then invited back for drinks. Flicking towels and flirting was probably all it

amounted to, before Profumo, later, briefly and secretly, took up with Keeler. Her account – of them all chasing down corridors and dressing up in suits of armour – was made unbelievable through sheer tabloid failure of imagination or invention. But it was an irresistible 'plot'. Stephen Ward, who committed suicide before the end of his trial, became a martyr and Bill Astor was cast as his rich friend who abandoned him. In fact, there was nothing Bill could have done to save Ward and he was not called as a witness at the trial. Bill tried to ride it out, throwing himself into work for his many charities. But the stress of it all undoubtedly hastened the heart attack that killed him shortly afterwards in 1966. For the family, Cliveden had been tainted again. Bill's heir, William, was 14 when his father died. The Astors told the National Trust they were leaving the building.

It was with some amazement, in the light of all this, that walking down a passage at Cliveden I saw, on the wall, a pastel portrait of Christine Keeler by Stephen Ward, acquired by the hotel. The portrait is reproduced in the glossy hotel brochure to advertise Stephen Ward's old cottage, now rentable at £6,000 a week with staff in attendance. The cottage has been restored, says the brochure, to make 'the perfect romantic hideaway for those who wish to be alone together.' It adds, 'Stephen Ward used the cottage for weekend parties entertaining such guests as Christine Keeler.' The word 'orgy' is surely stuttering to get out. Perhaps Keeler herself, now living a quiet life, could be invited down to give the guests a heritage tour of the past.

Cliveden's fortunes are turning again with the arrival of Bill Gates as an investor in the hotel. Perhaps he should buy the lease and live there himself. He could certainly afford it. He has much in common with William Waldorf. Like Gates, William Waldorf's fortune soared above his fellow men, and he, like Gates, was hounded by his fellow Americans as a monopolist – in his case for the Astor rents in Manhattan.

Perhaps Gates will come to believe, like William Waldorf, that 'America is not a fit place for a gentleman to live' as he, too, seeks refuge by Cliveden Reach. At least he won't have Queen Victoria watching from Windsor and sneering, as she did when William Waldorf bought Cliveden, 'It is grievous to think of it falling into these hands.'

'The Langhorne Sisters' (Granta, £20) by James Fox is available at the special price of £18 post free UK from Telegraph Books Direct, 24 Seward Street, London EC1V 3GB or by calling 0541-557222. Please quote ref. PA525 when ordering