



EARLY DAYS:
Nancy with family members in 1919

My great aunt Nancy

The cruellest and kindest woman I ever knew

33% extra free on Freedom Food ham...



Gammon Roast
120g £1.59

Herb Flavour
120g £1.59

Wafer Thin
150g £1.69

...but hurry, they won't be around forever.

TESCO
Every little helps.

Until 24th November get 33% extra free on RSPCA approved Freedom Food prepacked ham range.

BRITISH MEAT

AVAILABLE AT SELECTED STORES. WHILST STOCKS LAST. EXCLUDES NORTHERN IRELAND AND R.O.I. www.tesco.co.uk

THERE was nobody in my childhood who was as frightening, as exciting or as powerful as my great aunt Nancy Astor. Although by the time I was born her political career was already over, she still lived at Cliveden, the great house by the Thames where, with her husband Waldorf Astor, Nancy had conquered Edwardian society — a rapid rise from her impoverished origins in America.

Nancy was a brilliant and unconventional political hostess in the Twenties and Thirties. She was the first woman to sit in Parliament and held on to her Plymouth constituency for 25 years of political turbulence. By the time she stood down she had also become a heroine in her adopted city of London, rallying its inhabitants while braving the bombs and flying glass of the Blitz.

The Lady Astor that I knew was a much older woman. And by then she had become a dangerous loose cannon, her famously incautious tongue tuned up still further. But the sharp wit that had carried her through her political career had fallen out of balance, leaving a blunter weapon in its place.

This was manifested in acts of outrageous bullying which were often followed by the most attentive kindness. As a small boy I remember standing at my father's side one summer day in the garden of Rest Harrow, Lady Astor's house at Sandwich in Kent. She appeared suddenly in golfing clothes and snapped at my father — her nephew — in her chiming Virginia accent: "Go and change those disgustin' red pants. You're not in the Virgin Islands now."

My American father had recently returned from exile in the British Virgin Islands to comply with his divorce requirements. He was wearing a pair of coral-coloured trousers, perhaps to cheer his low spirits. I kept Nancy's two sentences in my head for many years until I understood that she was tactlessly rubbing salt in his wound.

However, no one was more generous and thoughtful to my father than Nancy in the succeeding years when he came to live in Britain. She had him to stay, she ordered him gifts — including a Savile Row suit to replace the red pants. He ended up her devoted admirer, immune to her tongue.

It was wise to learn quickly that, for Nancy, "poking people up" — as my grandmother, her sister Phyllis, put it — was her own form of communication. She genuinely believed she did it from affection. "If there was a nerve on a tooth she'd find it," said her niece, Nancy Lancaster. "And then she'd turn them. They always ended up her slaves. She started by punching you in the stomach and then she'd wheedle you and you'd end up staying the night."

For a child, this was more difficult. There is no doubt that she enjoyed reducing single children to tears as well as driving them, en masse, to a frenzy of hilarity. Entering her bedroom for her Christian Science "lessons" was like joining in some Punch and Judy show.

And yet we all loved her. I always looked forward to opening her illegible letters at school. There was almost always a large



Lady Astor was Britain's first woman author
James Fox reveals that drove her powerful

amount of money, by schoolboy standards, tucked into the envelope, all with confusing admonishments such as "Hold on to the Truth".

Divorce and alcohol were two of Lady Astor's lifelong denunciations, for sons established in her family history.

Her two elder brothers, who spent time on a spree in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, had died young a mixture of drink and tuberculosis. Nancy's first marriage to the hard drinking, philandering millionaire Rufus Shaw of Boston had ended in well covered scandal in 1904. Shaw had committed not only multiple adultery but bigamy, too.

The marriage had seemed an opportunity for a young Virginian beauty to escape the poverty of America's South, pushed along by her parents. Like her four sisters — Lizzie, Irene, Phyllis and Nora — and her three brothers, Nancy Langhorne was born in Danville, into the poverty of post-Civil War Virginia. The cramped bungalow where the family lived still stands in the town's main street. But things were to change when, some years later, their father Chillié Langhorne made sudden fortune on the railroads.

Sister Phyllis

CHILLIE was a rampaging Southern patriarch, not unlike a model for Gerald O'Hara in *Scarlett's* father in *Gone With the Wind*, and his collaboration with the Yankees lifted him from 25 years on the breadline. He bought Mirador, a colonnaded, colonial red-brick house near Charlottesville, where his sisters grew up. Its back porch looked across apple orchards and up a long slope towards the Blue Ridge Mountains, became a place of myth that helped create the Langhorne sisters' legend.

Phyllis was my grandmother's Nancy's younger and closest sister. She was the person whom, apart from

was Britain's first woman author... **JAMES FOX,** White Mischief, reveals conflicting impulses one of the most powerful figures of this century

firstborn son Bobbie Shaw, she loved most passionately all her life. Phyllis was beautiful, like the rest of them, but melancholy by nature. She had also had a disastrous first marriage to a drunken millionaire sportsman from Newport.

Both sisters — brilliant horsewomen — came to Britain to try their luck again, on the hunting fields of Leicestershire.

Phyllis married my grandfather Bob Brand, an economist and banker. Nancy married Waldorf Astor, whose father had settled in Britain and who was in line to be at least the fourth richest man in the world. As a result, Nancy and Phyllis suddenly found themselves at the centre of power.

Nancy went on to conquer society and the literary world. Then she surrounded herself with intellectuals and statesmen. She was always the driving force, fuelled by powerful, conflicting impulses.

There was "Nancy the Good", as she once signed a letter; generous to the point of profligacy, a brilliant hostess, a fairy godmother to many obscure people. She was the most compelling entertainer in an entertaining family, with the lack of caution, comic timing and deadly mimicry of a true comedian. I could still see those qualities in rusty action in her old age.

Her other great quality was utter social fearlessness — something very rarely seen. Nancy applied her talents to dominating the huge gatherings at Cliveden or the Astor house in St James's Square, talking down the table, singling out a guest with some personal or provocative remark.

It was alarming for the victim, a prototype of Dame Edna Everage's audience strikers. Some guests were, at their first encounter, rendered "speechless with indignation, reduced to stunned and respectful silence" — as one regular Cliveden guest remembered — by what seemed to them her sudden "outrageous onslaught on themselves, their friends,

everything they held sacred". But it was these qualities that endeared her to the electors of Plymouth and this courage that enabled her to stand up to a hostile House of Commons, where she quickly learned that for a woman not to be absorbed by the males, she had to continually break the rules of engagement, with cheek and directness.

"Mind your manners," started one exchange. "I won't," Nancy replied. "The noble Lady ought to withdraw," said the Speaker. "He asked for it," she countered. Nancy felt that these guerrilla tactics were what was expected of a Virginian — a born fighter.

But there was the other side of the coin. As one of her nephews put it: "She was by instincts a gangster who was always trying to be good." Nancy confessed in later life to a clergyman friend: "Every day I pray that I shall be really spiritual and that I'll be able to raise the dead, then I go out and all I do is raise hell."

Nancy's real exercise of power lay within the extended Langhorne family that was bound together with passionate family feeling. Michael Astor, her son, remembered Nancy as a "lively, dancing, sparkling figure" in his childhood before their bitter battles for independence took over. Her inability to show affection was matched by her powerful desire to be first in the affections of her family and her overbearing possessiveness towards her children was disguised as a justified crusade to keep them on the narrow way.

NANCY believed that family affection was a given fact, like blood or tribal loyalty. It didn't need affirming or demonstrating — just, from time to time, "poking up". "Conceived without pleasure, born without pain," Nancy would say proudly to her children. Her youngest son Jackie once replied: "Is that why we're all so odd?"

When her younger sons were in their teens and one of the playful-but-rough verbal battles was taking place — with Nancy ahead, as always, on points — she said: "I suppose you all think you're misunderstood." Her eldest son Bobbie replied: "There's no question of being understood. We've given up hoping for that long ago. All we want is a bit of civility."

But Nancy knew that she could always disarm her children by making them laugh. It was her last weapon against them. When her second Astor son, David — later editor of *The Observer* — finally walked out of the door, she called after him: "If you see your mother, give her my regards. I hear she's a very charming woman."

By the mid-Fifties she would be at war with most of her family, blaming and quarrelling, reducing them to a loveless state, fractured by her personality.

Nancy's decline began before the war was over. Unwilling to see her being further knocked about in Parliament, where her performance had often become rambling and her rudeness objectionable, Waldorf prevented her from standing again in the 1945 election. She saw it as a male conspiracy and never forgave him,

TURN TO NEXT PAGE



NATURAL BEAUTY:
John Singer Sargent captured Lady Astor's charms: the painting still hangs at Cliveden

Picture: NATIONAL TRUST PHOTOGRAPHIC LIBRARY/JOHN HAMMOND



RISING POWER: Lady Astor during the elections at Plymouth in 1923

It seemed that she had presided over a Greek tragedy

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

treating him with cruel hostility until he died in 1952.

But it was the Cliveden smear that really damaged Nancy's popularity — although she never realised it, partly because she knew there was no truth in it. The story, at the time of the Munich crisis and before, that Cliveden was the centre of a conspiracy of pro-German appeasers, has been disproved by historians but a scapegoat was needed after the shock of the Prague invasion. The Astors were good targets.

There was always a whiff of xenophobia about the accusations. One look at the Cliveden visitors book shows that regular guests included the conspicuous handful of anti-appeasers who had urged rearmament, warning that Hitler was bent on military conquest: Winston Churchill, Duff Cooper, Anthony Eden, Lord Cranbourne and Harold Macmillan all stayed there. But the mud stuck and it still sticks today.

MY GRANDFATHER, Bob Brand and Nancy were the last survivors of that generation. They had both presided over what seemed, to Bob at least, the workings of a Greek tragedy. The failed first marriages of Nancy and Phyllis came back to haunt them, as much as they wanted to excise them from history. The three sons from those two marriages all eventually committed suicide. One of these was Phyllis's second son and this triggered Phyllis's own premature death, from which my grandfather never recovered. To compound the tragedy his only son was killed in the last week of the war in his tank on the Rhine, aged 21.

A few weeks after this event, Bob wrote to Nancy. The letter describes, elegiacally, their vanished world.

On a trip from Washington to stay near Mirador, Bob walked over to the house — now shuttered and empty — and sat in the garden to write the letter:

"Not a soul here. The house shut... I have never felt such a ghost. When I think of two generations of gaiety, laughter, beauty here and now silence. This morning early the dove was softly mourning. This is a sound that, whenever I hear it, brings back to me hot mornings at Mirador when I first was in love with Phyl and when there was warmth and love and ease and happiness before me, and the smell of honeysuckle, an indescribable mixture that marks this time out from any other in my life and when Virginia became, as it remains, the truly romantic spot in the whole world. Everything passes, everything changes and God knows what we are or why we are here. Some moments have made life worth living. But they are all



SOCIETY SWINGER: Playing golf in 1933 with the then Prince of Wales

gone except in memory and when I think of the names in the Mirador visiting book, I wonder why I am still alive."

Nancy outlasted them all. Attending Bob's funeral, a year before her own death in 1964, she turned to my mother — Bob's daughter — and, never one for

sentiment, said: "I could kill your father for dyin'."

● To order *The Langhorne Sisters* (rrp £20) at the special price of £16 plus £1.99 p&p, send a cheque or PO for £17.99 to the Express Bookshop, 250 Western Ave, London W3 6EE or call 0181-324 5544.

'Nancy's failed first marriage came back to haunt her, much as she wanted to excise it from history'

THE EXPRESS box office

THE ROLLING STONES

PLUS SPECIAL GUEST SHERYL CROW

JUNE 1999
4TH MURRAYFIELD STADIUM, EDINBURGH
6TH DON VALLEY STADIUM, SHEFFIELD
11TH/12TH WEMBLEY STADIUM, LONDON

TICKETS £27.50
(EXCEPT LONDON £30.00)

SUBJECT TO BOOKING FEE AND AVAILABILITY

0870 164 4444

CALLS CHARGED AT NATIONAL RATES (MAX 7P PER MINUTE)
OPEN 24 HOURS A DAY
ALL MAJOR CREDIT/CHEQUE CARDS AND CHEQUES ACCEPTED
ADVICE FROM EXPERIENCED AND KNOWLEDGEABLE STAFF



THE EXPRESS



NEW YORK, NIAGARA & NEW ENGLAND 1999

A SUPERB 7-NIGHT FULLY ESCORTED TOUR BY LUXURY COACH

FROM ONLY £499*

Excluding £45 Passenger & Airport taxes

FLIGHTS FROM LONDON, BIRMINGHAM, MANCHESTER & GLASGOW



One of the travel bargains of the year — a wonderful, fully escorted 7-night tour to New York, Niagara Falls and New England!

Fly with us to the Big Apple and spend 2 nights discovering this amazing city. Ride to the top of the Empire State Building, sail out to the Statue of Liberty, shop along 5th Avenue or in Macy's or take a carriage ride through Central Park — the choice is all yours.

Then travel through scenic upstate New York to Niagara and our base for the next 3 nights. Here there'll be plenty of time for you to witness one of the natural wonders of the world as the waters of Lake Erie cascade almost 200 feet into Lake Ontario. As well as the delights of Niagara, you could join our optional excursion to nearby Toronto, Canada largest city.

From Niagara we take you back into the USA and to the beautiful Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts where you'll see scenic New England countryside, picturesque villages and white clapboard churches. The final stage of your journey returns you to New York to check-in for your evening flight home.

Included in this superb value-for-money holiday are scheduled flights from Heathrow, Birmingham, Manchester or Glasgow, accommodation in carefully chosen hotels, luxury coach travel and an experienced Tour Manager to escort you throughout.

Departures are throughout 1999. For details of this and other super-value holidays to North America apply for our brochure today.

24-Hour Brochureline

01784 34434

Please send me details of your New York, Niagara & New England '99 Trip.

TITLE (Mr./Mrs./Miss/Ms).....NAME.....

(Block Capitals) ADDRESS.....

POST CODE..... DAYTIME TEL.....

FAX ENQUIRIES 01784 431415 OR E-MAIL brochures@mediatravel.co.uk

Applications to: New York, Niagara & New England '99 Trip,

MEDIA TRAVEL, Lawrence House, 45 High Street, Egham, Surrey TW20 9DP.

In an average week which issues of The Express do you usually buy? Mon Tue Wed

Thur Fri Sat Sun Don't Buy Date of birth:/...../..... Male Female

If you prefer not to receive information and offers from organisations carefully selected by Media Travel, please tick here

77DX 469807 Ref No. 999

