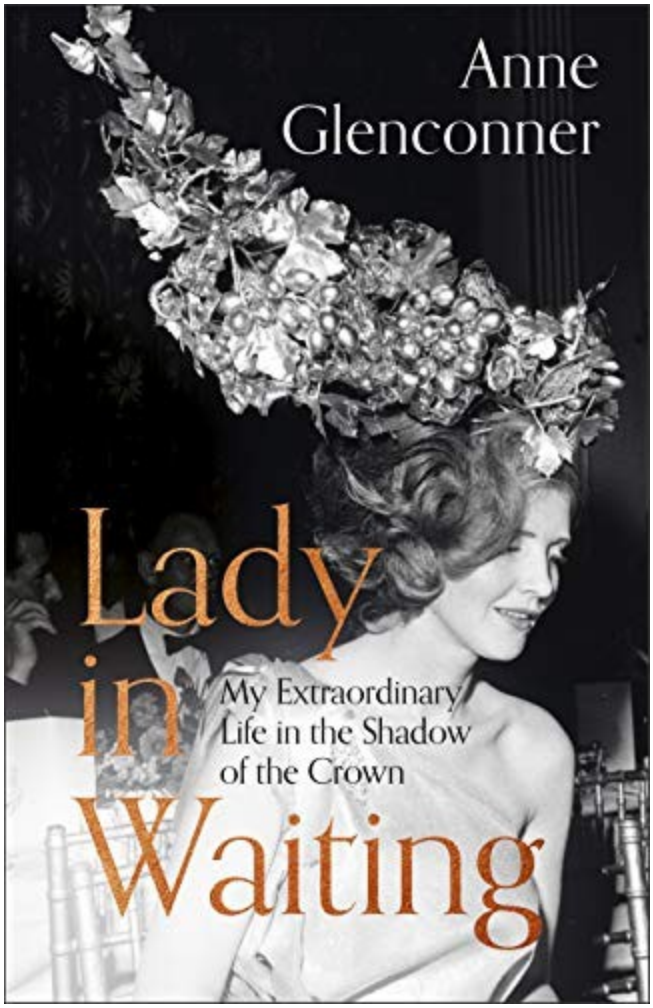

About the Author

Lady Glenconner is now 87. She was born Lady Anne Coke in 1932, the eldest daughter of the 5th Earl of Leicester, and growing up in their ancestral estate at Holkham Hall in Norfolk. A Maid of Honour at the Queen's Coronation, she married Lord Glenconner in 1956. She was appointed Lady in Waiting to Princess Margaret in 1971 and kept this role – accompanying her on many state occasions and foreign tours – until

Princess Margaret's death in 2002.

Lady Glenconner now lives in a farmhouse near Kings Lynn in Norfolk.

Lady in Waiting

My Extraordinary Life in the Shadow of the Crown

Anne Glenconner

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For my children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren

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PROLOGUE

One morning at the beginning of 2019, when I was in my London flat, the telephone rang.

'Hello?'

'Lady Glenconner? It's Helena Bonham Carter.'

It's not every day a Hollywood film star rings me up, although I had been expecting her call. When the producers of the popular Netflix series *The Crown* contacted me, saying that I was going to be portrayed by Nancy Carroll in the third series, and that Helena Bonham Carter had been cast as Princess Margaret, I was delighted. Asked whether I minded meeting them so they could get a better idea of my friendship with Princess Margaret, I said I didn't mind in the least.

Nancy Carroll came to tea, and we sat in armchairs in my sitting room and talked. The conversation was surreal as I became extremely self-aware, realising that Nancy must be absorbing what *I* was like.

A few days later when Helena was on the telephone, I invited her for tea too. Not only do I admire her as an actress but, as it happens, she is a cousin of my late husband Colin Tennant, and her father helped me when one of my sons had a motorbike accident in the eighties.

As Helena walked through the door, I noticed a resemblance between

her and Princess Margaret: she is just the right height and figure, and although her eyes aren't blue, there is a similar glint of mischievous intelligence in her gaze.

We sat down in the sitting room, and I poured her some tea. Out came her notebook, where she had written down masses of questions in order to get the measure of the Princess, 'to do her justice', she explained.

A lot of her questions were about mannerisms. When she asked how the Princess had smoked, I described it as rather like a Chinese tea ceremony: from taking her long cigarette holder out of her bag and carefully putting the cigarette in, to always lighting it herself with one of her beautiful lighters. She hated it when others offered to light it for her, and when any man eagerly advanced, she would make a small but definite gesture with her hand to make it quite clear.

I noticed that Helena moved her hand in the tiniest of reflexes, as if to test the movement I'd just described, before going on to discuss Princess Margaret's character. I tried to capture her quick wit – how she always saw the humorous side of things, not one to dwell, her attitude positive and matter-of-fact. As we talked, the descriptions felt so vivid, it was as though Princess Margaret was in the room with us. Helena listened to everything very carefully, making lots of notes. We talked for three hours, and when

she left, I felt certain that she was perfectly cast for the role.

Both actors sent me letters thanking me for my help, Helena Bonham Carter expressing the hope that Princess Margaret would be as good a friend to her as she was to me. I felt very touched by this and the thought of Princess Margaret and I being reunited on screen was something I looked forward to. I found myself reflecting back on our childhood spent together in Norfolk, the thirty years I'd been her Lady in Waiting, all the times we had found ourselves in hysterics, and the ups and downs of both our lives.

I've always loved telling stories, but it never occurred to me to write a book until these two visits stirred up all those memories. From a generation where we were taught not to over-think, not to look back or question, only now do I see how extraordinary the nine decades of my life have really been, full of extreme contrasts. I have found myself in a great many odd circumstances, both hilarious and awful, many of which seem, even to me, unbelievable. But I feel very fortunate that I have my wonderful family and for the life I have led.

CHAPTER ONE

The Greatest Disappointment

HOLKHAM HALL COMMANDS the land of North Norfolk with a hint of disdain. It

is an austere house and looks its best in the depths of summer when the

grass turns the colour of Demerara sugar so the park seems to merge into the house. The coast nearby is a place of harsh winds and big skies, of miles of salt marsh and dark pine forests that hem the dunes, giving way to the vast stretch of the grey-golden sand of Holkham beach: a landscape my ancestors changed from open marshes to the birthplace of agriculture. Here, in the flight path of the geese and the peewits, the Coke (pronounced 'cook') family was established in the last days of the Tudors by Sir Edward Coke, who was considered the greatest jurist of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, successfully prosecuting Sir Walter Raleigh and the Gunpowder Plot conspirators. My family crest is an ostrich swallowing an iron horseshoe to symbolise our ability to digest anything.

There is a photograph of me, taken at my christening in the summer of 1932. I am held by my father, the future 5th Earl of Leicester, and surrounded by male relations wearing solemn faces. I had tried awfully hard to be a boy, even weighing eleven pounds at birth, but I was a girl and there was nothing to be done about it.

My female status meant that I would not inherit the earldom, or Holkham, the fifth largest estate in England with its 27,000 acres of top-grade agricultural land, neither the furniture, the books, the paintings, nor the silver. My parents went on to have two more children, but they were

also daughters: Carey two years later and Sarah twelve years later. The line was broken, and my father must have felt the weight of almost four centuries of disapproval on his conscience.

My mother had awarded her father, the 8th Lord Hardwicke, the same fate, and maybe in solidarity, and because she thought I needed to have a strong character, she named me Anne Veronica, after H. G. Wells's book about a hardy feminist heroine. Born Elizabeth Yorke, my mother was capable, charismatic and absolutely the right sort of girl my grandfather would have expected his son to marry. She herself was the daughter of an earl, whose ancestral seat was Wimpole Hall in Cambridgeshire.

My father was handsome, popular, passionate about country pursuits, and eligible as the heir to the Leicester earldom. They met when she was fifteen and he was seventeen, during a skiing trip in St Moritz, becoming unofficially engaged immediately, he apparently having said to her, 'I just know I want to marry you.' He was also spurred on by being rather frightened of another girl who lived in Norfolk and had taken a fancy to him, so he was relieved to be able to stop her advances by declaring himself already engaged.

My mother was very attractive and very confident, and I think that's what drew my father to her. He was more reserved so she brought out the

fun in him and they balanced each other well.

Together, they were one of the golden couples of high society and were great friends of the Duke and Duchess of York, who later, because of the abdication of the Duke's brother, King Edward VIII, unexpectedly became King and Queen. They were also friends with Prince Philip's sisters, Princesses Theodora, Margarita, Cecilie and Sophie, who used to come for holidays at Holkham. Rather strangely, Prince Philip, who was much younger, still only a small child, used to stay with his nanny at the Victoria, a pub right next to the beach, instead of at Holkham. Recently I asked him why he had stayed at the pub instead of the house, but he didn't know for certain, so we joked about him wanting to be as near to the beach as possible.

My parents were married in October 1931 and I was a honeymoon baby, arriving on their first wedding anniversary.

Up until I was nine, my great-grandfather was the Earl of Leicester and lived at Holkham with my grandfather, who occupied one of the four wings. The house felt enormous, especially seen through the eyes of a child. So vast, the footmen would put raw eggs in a bain-marie and take them from the kitchen to the nursery: by the time they arrived, the eggs would be perfectly boiled. We visited regularly and I adored my grandfather, who

made an effort to spend time with me: we would sit in the long gallery, listening to classical music on the gramophone together, and when I was a bit older, he introduced me to photography, a passion he successfully transferred to me.

With my father in the Scots Guards, we moved all over the country, and I was brought up by nannies, who were in charge of the ins and outs of daily life. My mother didn't wash or dress me or my sister Carey; nor did she feed us or put us to bed. Instead, she would interject daily life with treats and days out.

My father found fatherhood difficult: he was strait-laced and fastidious and he was always nagging us to leave our bedroom windows open and checking to make sure we had been to the lavatory properly. I used to struggle to sit on his knee but because I was too big he would push me away in favour of Carey, whom he called 'my little dolly daydreams'.

Having grown up with Victorian parents, his childhood was typical of a boy in his position. He was brought up by nannies and governesses, sent to Eton and then on to Sandhurst, his father making sure his son knew what was expected of him as heir. He was loving, but from afar: he was not affectionate or sentimental, and did not share his emotions. No one did, not even my mother, who would give us hugs and show her affection but rarely

talked about her feelings or mine – there were no heart-to-hearts. As I got older she would give me pep talks instead. It was a generation and a class who were not brought up to express emotions.

But in many other ways my mother was the complete opposite of my father. Only nineteen years older than me, she was more like a big sister, full of mischief and fun. Carey and I used to shin up trees with her and a soup ladle tied to a walking stick. With it, we would scoop up jackdaws' eggs, which were delicious to eat, rather like plovers'. Those early childhood days were filled with my mother making camps with us on the beach or taking us on trips in her little Austin, getting terribly excited as we came across ice-cream sellers on bicycles calling, 'Stop me and buy one.' The epitome of grace and elegance when she needed to be, she also had the gumption to pursue her own hobbies, which were often rather hands-on: she was a fearless horsewoman and rode a Harley-Davidson. She passed on her love of sailing to me. I was five when I started navigating the nearby magical creeks of Burnham Overy Staithe in dinghies, and eighty when I stopped. I used to go in for local races, but I was quite often last, and would arrive only to find everyone had gone home.

Holkham was a completely male-oriented estate and the whole set-up was undeniably old-fashioned. My great-great-grandfather, the 2nd Earl,

who had inherited his father's title in 1842 and was the earl when my father was a boy, was a curmudgeon and so set in his ways that even his wife had to call him 'Leicester'. When he was younger, he apparently passed a nurse with a baby in the corridor and asked, 'Whose child is that?'

The nurse had replied, 'Yours, my lord!'

A crusty old thing, he had spent his last years lying in a truckle bed in the state rooms. He wore tin-framed spectacles, and when he went outside, he would go around the park in a horse-drawn carriage, with his long-suffering second wife, who sat on a cushion strapped to a mudguard.

Influenced by the line of traditional earls, Holkham was slow to modernise, keeping distinctly separate roles for the men and women. In the summer, the ladies would go and stay in Meales House, the old manor down by the beach, for a holiday known as 'no-stays week' when they quite literally let their hair down and took off their corsets.

From when I was very little, my grandfather started to teach me about my ancestors: about how Thomas Coke, 1st Earl of Leicester in its fifth creation (the line had been broken many times, only adding to the disappointment of my father at having no sons), had gone off to Europe on a grand tour – the equivalent of an extremely lavish gap year – and shipped back dozens of paintings and marble statues from Italy that came wrapped

in *Quercus ilex* leaves and acorns, the eighteenth-century answer to bubble wrap.

He told me all about when the *ilex* acorns were planted, becoming the first avenue of *ilex* trees (also called holm oak, a Mediterranean evergreen) in England. My grandfather's father had sculpted the landscape, pushing the marshes away from the house by planting the pine forests that now line Holkham beach. Before him, the 1st Earl in its seventh creation became known as 'Coke of Norfolk' because he had such a huge impact on the county through his influence on farming – he was the man credited with British agricultural reform.

Life at Holkham continued to revolve around farming the land, all elements of which were taken seriously. As well as dozens of tenant farmers, there were a great many gardeners to look after the huge kitchen garden. The brick walls were heated with fires all along, stoked through the night by the garden boys, so nectarines and peaches would ripen sooner. On hot summer days I loved riding my bike up to the kitchen gardens, being handed a peach, then cycling as fast as I could to the fountain at the front of the house and jumping into the water to cool down.

Shooting was also a huge part of Holkham life, and really what my father and all his friends lived for. It was the main bond between the Cokes

and the Royal Family, especially with Sandringham only ten miles away – a mere half an hour's drive. Queen Mary had once rung my great-grandmother, suggesting she come over with the King, only for my great-grandfather to be heard bellowing, 'Come over? Good God, no! We don't want to encourage them!'

My father shot with the present Queen's father, King George VI, and my great-grandfather and grandfather with King George V on both estates, but it was Holkham that was particularly famous for shooting: it held the record for wild partridges for years and it's where covert shooting was invented (where a copse is planted in a round so that it shelters the game, the gun dogs flushing out the birds gradually, allowing for maximum control, making the shoot more efficient).

It was also where the bowler hat was invented: one of my ancestors had got so fed up with the top hat being so impractical that he went off to London and ordered a new type of hat, checking how durable it was by stamping and jumping on it until he was content. From then on gamekeepers wore the 'billy coke', as it was called then.

There were other royal connections in the family too. It is well documented that Edward, Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII, had many love affairs with married, often older glamorous aristocrats, the first

being my paternal grandmother, Marion.

My father was Equerry to the Duke of York and his sister, my aunt Lady Mary Harvey, was Lady in Waiting to the Duchess of York after she became Queen. When the Duke of York was crowned King George VI in 1937, my father became his Extra Equerry; and in 1953 my mother became a Lady of the Bedchamber, a high-ranking Lady in Waiting, to Queen Elizabeth II on her Coronation.

My father especially was a great admirer of the Royal Family and was always very attentive when they came to visit. My earliest memories of Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret come from when I was two or three years old. Princess Elizabeth was five years older, which was quite a lot – she was rather grown-up – but Princess Margaret was only three years older and we became firm friends. She was naughty, fun and imaginative – the very best sort of friend to have. We used to rush around Holkham, past the grand pictures, whirling through the labyrinth of corridors on our trikes or jumping out at the nursery footmen as they carried huge silver trays from the kitchen. Princess Elizabeth was much better behaved. ‘Please don’t do that, Margaret,’ or ‘You shouldn’t do that, Anne,’ she would scold us.

In one photograph we are all standing in a line. Princess Elizabeth is frowning at Princess Margaret, suspecting she is up to no good, while

Princess Margaret is staring down at my shoes. Years afterwards, I showed Princess Margaret the photo and asked, ‘Ma’am, why were you looking at my feet?’

And she replied, ‘Well, I was so jealous because you had silver shoes and I had brown ones.’

In the summer the Princesses would come down to Holkham beach where we would spend whole days making sandcastles, clad in the most unattractive and prickly black bathing suits with black rubber caps and shoes. The nannies would bundle us all into the beach bus, along with wicker picnic baskets full of sandwiches, and set up in the beach hut every day, whatever the weather – the grown-ups had a separate hut among the trees at the back. We had wonderful times, digging holes in the sand, hoping people would fall into them.

Every Christmas, my family would go to a party at Buckingham Palace, and Carey and I would be dressed up in frilly frocks and the coveted silver shoes. At the end of the parties, the children would be invited to take a present each from the big table in the hall near the Christmas tree. Behind the table stood the formidable Queen Mary, who was quite frightening. She was tall and imposing, and Princess Margaret never warmed to her because every time she saw her, Queen Mary would say, ‘I can see you haven’t

grown.' Princess Margaret minded frightfully about being small all her life, so never liked her grandmother.

Queen Mary did teach me a valuable life lesson, however. One year Carey rushed up to the table and clasped a huge teddy bear, which was sitting upright among the other presents. Before I chose mine, Queen Mary leant down towards me. 'Anne,' she said quietly, 'quite often rather nice, rather valuable things come in little boxes.' I froze. I'd had my eye on another teddy bear but now I was far too frightened to choose anything other than a little box. Inside it was a beautiful necklace of pearl and coral. Queen Mary was quite right. My little box contained something that is still appreciated to this day.

Our connection to the Royal Family was close. When I was in my late teens, Prince Charles became like a younger brother to me, spending weeks with us all at Holkham. He would come to stay whenever he had any of the contagious childhood diseases, like chickenpox, because the Queen, having never gone to school, had not been exposed to them. Sixteen years younger than me, Prince Charles was nearer in age to my youngest sister Sarah, but all of us would go off to the beach together.

My father taught him how to fish for eel in the lake, and when he got a bit older, my mother let him drive the Jaguar and the Mini Minor around the

park, something he loved doing, sending great long thank-you letters telling her he couldn't wait to return. He was such a kind and loving little boy and I've loved him ever since – the whole family have always been deeply fond of him.

As soon as I was old enough to ride, I made the park at Holkham my own, riding past the great barn, making little jumps for Kitty, my pony. When we were a bit older, Carey and I would follow one of the very good-looking tenant farmers, Gary Maufe, on our ponies. Many years later I became a great friend of his wife, Marit. He used to gallop across the park on a great big black stallion, and after him we would go on our hopeless ponies, giddying them up, desperately trying to keep up.

It wasn't just my family who were part of Holkham but everybody who worked on the estate, some of whom had very distinctive characters. Mr Patterson, the head gardener, would enthusiastically play his bagpipes in the mornings whenever my parents had friends to stay, until my mother would shout, 'That's quite enough, Mr Patterson, thank you!'

My early childhood was idyllic, but the outbreak of war in 1939 changed everything. I was seven, Carey was five. My father was posted to Egypt with the Scots Guards so my mother followed to support him, as many wives did. Holkham Hall was partly occupied by the army, and the

temple in the park was used to house the Home Guard, while the gardeners and footmen were called up, and the maids and cooks went off to work in factories to help with the war effort.

Everybody thought the Germans would choose to invade Britain from the Norfolk coast, so before my mother left for Egypt, she moved Carey and me up to Scotland, to stay with my Great-aunt Bridget, away from Mr Hitler's U-boats.

When she said goodbye, she told me, 'Anne, you're in charge. You've got to look after Carey.' If we had known how long she was going to be away, it would have been even harder, but no one had any idea how long the war would last and that, in fact, she and my father would be gone for three years.

CHAPTER TWO

Hitler's Mess

WE WENT TO live with our Ogilvy cousins in Downie Park, one of the

Ogilvys' shooting lodges in Angus: their main house, Cortachy Castle, had been requisitioned and was being used as a hospital for Polish officers. Although Carey and I were unsettled by the separation from our parents, going to Scotland felt like an adventure. I loved my Ogilvy cousins. There were six of them, and the three youngest – David, Angus and James – were all about the same age as me and Carey. We knew them well because every summer they would come and stay at Holkham, having great fun together, exploring and making up games. We watched as the boys played endless rounds of cricket on the terrace, wearing their special linen kilts that Carey and I wished we had. Our nanny wasn't quite so keen on them all because the best fruit – a valuable treat in those days – was kept for them and she would say they had come to 'take over'.

They were all very welcoming at Downie Park, and I was especially fond of David, whom I followed everywhere. I adored their mother, my Great-aunt Bridget, who was born Lady Alexandra Coke and was my grandfather's sister.

Great-aunt Bridget was a Christian Scientist – a nineteenth-century religion established by Mary Baker Eddy, which, during the First World War, cut a swathe through the aristocracy, converting many to it. It operates on the belief that sickness is an illusion that can be corrected by prayer. This

provided comfort for Great-aunt Bridget and her husband, my Great-uncle Joe, the Earl of Airlie, because he, like many men, was suffering from the effects of the Great War. Great-aunt Bridget practised her beliefs and passed on many useful pieces of advice to me. Perhaps the advice that stuck with me most is ‘Things have a habit of working out, not necessarily in the way you expect, and you must never force them.’ Her grounded approach served Carey and me well, because we both found it very disconcerting to be away from our parents, with the outbreak of war.

On 3 September 1939, Great-aunt Bridget brought us down to the drawing room in Downie Park, where we listened to Neville Chamberlain’s declaration of war on the ancient wireless. There was something heavy and serious in the Prime Minister’s voice, which mirrored the atmosphere in the room. I stared at the carpet as I listened, not really knowing what was happening, wondering when we would be able to go home.

There was a very different atmosphere when, in 1940, Princess Elizabeth directly addressed the children of Britain. Again, we sat on the carpet in the drawing room, huddled round the wireless craning our necks towards Princess Elizabeth’s voice, excited that we all knew her. It felt as if she was talking directly to us. At the end, Princess Elizabeth said, ‘My sister is by my side and we are both going to say goodnight to you. Come

on, Margaret.' And Princess Margaret responded, 'Goodnight, children.' We all answered back, thinking they could hear us, somehow imagining they were *in* the wireless. The Princesses were our heroines. So many children of our parents' friends had been sent off to America in order to escape the war and there were the two Princesses, still in England, in as much danger as us all.

The war meant that Carey and I and the Princesses were no longer in Norfolk together and the only time we saw them was when Carey, the Ogilvys and I visited Glamis Castle – Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother's family estate, where Princess Margaret had been born.

Glamis is said to be the most haunted castle in Scotland and Princess Margaret knew every nook, cranny and ghoul. As we were exploring the grounds, she told us stories about the ghosts, the grey lady who is said to haunt the chapel and the tongue-less lady who runs across the lawn. The Ogilvys relished the stories and told their own, all about how there was a ghost at Cortachy, who would beat a drum whenever someone in the family died, leaving me relieved that Cortachy had been requisitioned. Just before we left, Princess Margaret took us down to see the train, which puffed along the edge of the grounds, standing on the bridge over the railway line, being enveloped in steam.

Apart from that, we didn't see them and life was quite limited. With no petrol and living in a big house far from the nearest town or city, we stayed within the grounds of Downie Park, only once going to Dundee when Uncle Joe took us to the theatre.

In the winter we would skate on the frozen lake, and when we weren't having lessons with our governess, we would do our 'war work', collecting sphagnum moss for the Red Cross, who used it to help to dress wounds, knitting gloves for the sailors on the mine sweepers, and entertaining the Polish officers at Cortachy Castle by playing snakes and ladders on their beds and putting on amateur dramatics for them.

Every afternoon, we would take our fresh air and exercise by walking down the long drive, then return to the house where a man from the nearby town of Kirriemuir would teach us to dance. Carey and I put on our black dancing shoes and in the vast dining room, with our cousin James, who was the same age as Carey and always wore a kilt, learnt how to do the Highland Fling and the Sword Dance.

James was not always so beguiling. He and Carey would regularly gang up on me. This might have been because I spent a great deal of time, rather pathetically, hugging trees, climbing up them and pretending they were my friends. Once up them, however, I would be too frightened to come down,

so Carey and James would stand below, teasing me with their particular catchphrase: ‘Cowardy, cowardy custard!’ I had arrived at Downie Park a rather shy child, but I gradually came out of my shell. Being in a big pack of Ogilvys and part of a boisterous group soon toughened me up.

My parents had sent our own governess to Downie, my mother telling me before she left for Egypt: ‘You’re now too old to have a nanny, so Daddy and I have chosen a governess for you called Miss Bonner and she is very nice, and you will be very happy with her.’ Well, it turned out that Miss Bonner was not very nice. She was fairly all right with Carey, but really cruel to me. Every night, whatever I had done, however well I had behaved, she would punish me by tying my hands to the back of the bed and leaving me like that all night. I was too frightened of Miss Bonner to ask Carey to untie me, and Carey would have been too frightened to do it anyway. Both Carey and I suffered badly through this. I wanted to protect Carey, fearing Miss Bonner might do the same to her, so neither of us told anyone. While Miss Bonner did not do the same to my little sister, Carey witnessed this inexplicable behaviour towards me and felt powerless that there was nothing she could do. Her distress would manifest itself in high temperatures linked to no specific illness.

Because my mother had chosen Miss Bonner, I thought she knew what

the governess was doing to me and didn't mind, or even thought it was good for me. It caused me terrible confusion because I couldn't understand why my parents would want me to be treated like that.

Fortunately, Great-aunt Bridget's Christian Science saved me.

Eventually, Miss Bonner was sacked, not because of her ill-treatment of me (which I am sure Great-aunt Bridget knew nothing about) but for being a Roman Catholic and taking me to Mass. There was nothing worse than Catholicism, as far as Great-aunt Bridget was concerned. When Miss Bonner left, I made a big fuss, pretending to be really upset that she was going, fearing she might somehow blame me and do something even more horrible.

Miss Bonner left an invisible scar on me. To this day, I find it almost impossible to think about what she did to me. Years later, she sent me a card congratulating me on my engagement, which triggered the most unpleasant rush of memories and made me physically sick.

Luckily, Miss Bonner was replaced with Miss Billy Williams, who was wonderful, although she looked rather daunting with a nose that was always running and one leg longer than the other so she had a limp. But she twinkled with kindness.

The minute Billy Williams set foot in Carey's and my lives, everything

changed, and within days, we were devoted to her. I think she realised I'd had a difficult time with her predecessor, because she often gave me treats, taking me on fun days out. One of my favourite places was an Ogilvy shooting lodge, which was tucked into the hillside, surrounded by heather. She'd take us all off, walking along a pretty stream that ran through the bottom of the garden, stopping for a picnic, during which we would roll heather in a piece of newspaper and pretend to smoke it. We thought that was frightfully dashing.

As the months turned to years we became more aware of the horrors of the war, overhearing conversations referring to the increasing attacks on Britain. Even though we had been sent up to Scotland to get away from danger, we weren't far from Dundee, which was targeted heavily. In fact, there were more than five hundred German air raids on Scotland so we would probably have been safer staying in Norfolk. Once a German plane was shot down just above Tulcan lodge and, as a 'great treat', Billy Williams took me up to the wreckage to have a look. It was still smoking, although we saw no body, and I still have a piece of map I took from the plane, which was scattered in the heather.

As Carey and I absorbed more information, mostly through the wireless that James's nanny listened to tirelessly, we became convinced that Hitler

and all his henchmen would come to England and each choose a stately home to live in. We had some idea that Hitler was going to Windsor and presumed, rather grandly, that either Himmler or Goering would choose Holkham. We weren't far wrong. It transpired that the Nazis had indeed planned to take over the country estates, although Hitler had his sights on Blenheim.

Carey and I, I suspect like many other imaginative children of the time, felt helpless in the face of the war. Knitting gloves and playing board games with Polish officers somehow didn't feel helpful enough. Our father was fighting and our mother, we had been told, was doing 'war work', but we were doing nothing to stop Hitler.

Discussing the dire situation, Carey and I became convinced Hitler was bound to visit Holkham at some point, so we decided that, somehow, we would go back there to kill him. In preparation for the assassination, we created a poison that we called 'Hitler's mess', a collection of jam jars containing anything really disgusting – scraps of food and medicine, muddy water and bits of fluff from the carpet. We hid it under our beds until it became so smelly that Billy Williams made us throw it away and, determined, we were forced to start again.

We had decided to make Hitler fall in love with us, which, when I think

about it now, was rather like the Mitfords. But, then, we were going to kill him – which, I suppose, was rather unlike the Mitfords. Of course, we had no real understanding of the situation and even less control over our own lives. That was why we devised our plan. We had heard he liked the Aryan look and we were both fair-haired, especially Carey, who was the blondest little thing with huge blue eyes. We thought we must take advantage of this in order to save Britain.

We used to practise by pretending our teddy bear was Hitler, sidling up to him and saying things like, 'How lovely to see you. We're so pleased you've come to Holkham,' and 'Do you enjoy staying here? We've got a lovely drink for you, Mr Hitler – we've been saving it especially for you.' We didn't quite think through what would happen if we did actually manage to kill Hitler, but then I suppose we didn't get that far. We were absolutely convinced, however, that we could and would do it.

In 1943, when I was ten and Carey was eight, our parents returned from Egypt and we returned to Norfolk. It was an underwhelming reunion – our parents were like strangers to us and, instead of a warm embrace after so many years, Carey and I clung to Billy Williams, hiding behind her, out of sight. It was only a day or so before our mother won back our affection, but it took longer to build a rapport with our father, who wasn't as open and

friendly and never hugged us like our mother.

By then my great-grandfather had died and my grandfather had become 4th Earl of Leicester. For a little while we lived in the Red House in the village at Holkham, with one ancient maid nicknamed Speedy because she moved so slowly. Carey and I enjoyed living there, playing with the village boys in the wood near the house – we called it ‘the donkey wood’.

Then we moved into the family wing at Holkham. It was the first time, apart from holidays, I had ever lived in the big house and it felt very exciting to know that it was now our official home.

My grandfather liked to interest me and, wanting to teach me about Holkham’s treasures, put me in charge of airing the Codex Leicester, Leonardo da Vinci’s seventy-two-page manuscript, a study on water and stars. Once a fortnight, I would retrieve it from the butler’s pantry, where it was kept in a safe along with the Coke jewels and a Bible picture book.

I used to lick my finger and spin through the pages, frowning down at Da Vinci’s mirror handwriting, studying the little drawings and diagrams with interest. Bought on the 1st Earl’s grand tour, it belonged to my family for at least two hundred and fifty years before, very sadly, my father had to sell it, needing money for the upkeep of the estate. Acquired at Christie’s by an American businessman, Armand Hammer, in the eighties, it was then

sold on to Bill Gates in 1994 for $30.8 million, a record sum, making it the most valuable book in the world – and covered with my DNA.

Life soon settled down at Holkham. My father continued his duties with the Scots Guards and my mother became head of North Norfolk's Land Girls. Carey and I spent a lot of time playing in the house, making dens in the attic out of a collection of Old Masters deemed too louche for the walls of the state rooms, oblivious to the value and the subject.

But the estate wasn't the same as it had been before the war. There was a prisoner-of-war camp in the park, first for Italians, then Germans, and the gamekeepers helped guard them. Carey and I were very curious and whirled around the outside of the camp on our ponies, spying on the prisoners. The Italians were charming, always waving and smiling, and became friends with my mother who, after the war, employed some of their sisters to work at Holkham: a lot of them decided to settle in England.

The Germans weren't so friendly, and Carey and I were terrified of them. They wore patches on their legs and arms – shooting targets should they escape – which the gamekeepers longed for them to do so they could put in their game book: '14 pheasants, 6 partridge, 1 German'. As far as I know, the prisoners never tried to escape – the Germans were far more frightened of the keepers than they were of the official guards.

Holkham beach wasn't the same either. We couldn't picnic on the dunes because they were being used as a military practice ground, and the beach was covered with London buses and taxis on which the Royal Air Force practised airstrikes. At the end of the war, the buses and taxis were just left there. There is a big sand dune now where they were, and I expect most people have no idea they are still under it, rusting away in their sandy tomb. The military also practised drills all the way along the woodland near the sand dunes and on the marsh. There was a pond at the edge of the marsh where a wall was built for training the soldiers who, throwing smoke bombs in front of them, had then to jump blindly over the wall and into the pond. Carey and I would take great delight in watching and, getting carried away, we would shout, 'Go on, jump, you cowardy cowardy custards! It's not at all deep. It's only a bit of water.' Within moments, a furious sergeant major would rush up, red in the face, yelling, 'What are you doing, girls? Will you get away? You're ruining my training!' at which point, we'd grab our bikes and scamper off, giggling.

My childhood was a curious mix of carefree adventure in beautiful surroundings and a pressing fear of the war. By the time I was eleven, long days of playing with Carey were swapped for boarding school. In the autumn of 1943, holding a single leather trunk with my name on it, off I

went by train to Downham – a small school in Essex for girls. Because of the war, most of the teachers had been called up or moved into jobs to help with the war effort. Left with the halt and the lame, I was hardly likely to learn anything at all.

The school was in a big old house where we all had to sleep in the cellars for the first few terms because of the doodlebugs, which, overshooting London, would land very close to where we were:, the plaster would fall from the ceiling into our bunks. It was terribly frightening, and after a strike, I would check to see if I was in one piece. None of our parents seemed very concerned.

I felt rather alone and unsure. I had been away from my parents for three years and suddenly I was without them once more, and also without my governess, Billy Williams, and Carey, both of whom I adored.

Gradually I did settle in, though, making friends, who included a girl called Caroline Blackwood, later the writer, and wife of Lucian Freud, who used to walk with me to lessons and lived in a perpetual daydream. The older I got, naturally, the easier the five years of boarding school became, and after two years, Carey joined me, which was a comfort.

The headmistress, Mrs Crawford, had a gung-ho attitude and, despite having a husband, lived with another teacher, Miss Graham. Having played

cricket for Scotland, Mrs Crawford tried to teach us girls to play. I hated it – I was always fielding a long way out, praying the ball didn't come near and dreading the shout, 'Quick! Catch, Anne!' whereupon I would inevitably drop it. The ball was so hard it hurt if it hit you. I did, however, enjoy lacrosse. A most aggressive game, it seemed to be made up of us all rushing about bashing people's teeth out with our sticks.

Our games mistress was called Ma P., though I thought she was really half-man. She was always blowing her whistle, whether to her dog or to us we never quite knew. She was the one who would get us into the swimming pool. It was always freezing cold but from 1 June, like it or not, we would 'jolly well get in'. I quite liked swimming and got some medals, including one for life-saving, which involved Carey volunteering to be the body, wearing clothes and being dragged halfway along the pool underwater. I passed and she survived.

Just before the end of the war, when I was twelve, my sister Sarah was born. Carey and I had known our mother was pregnant but when my father's sister Aunt Silvia rang us at school to tell us the news, we burst into tears. We knew how desperately my father had wanted a son and heir, and with my mother almost dying in childbirth, there was no chance of them having any more children, marking the end of my father's particular line of

Cokes.

Despite the huge disappointment for the family, we all adored Sarah, whom we doted on, treating her like a doll. It was great fun to have another sister although Carey's and my childhood was separate from Sarah's because she was so much younger than us. Once the school term had finished, we would rush home to see her, our mother proudly showing off the rabbit-skin coat she had made for Sarah. She obviously hadn't cured it properly because the coat was completely stiff, so Sarah would sit in her pram, her arms stuck straight out, rather as if she was in a straitjacket.

When we were home, my mother took charge, organising every day with something active and fun that she would do with us all, an attitude that was rare. My school friends would remark on how amazing they thought she was, saying things like 'I wish I could have a mother like yours. My mother never plays with me.' But after the holidays, Carey and I would return to school on the train, waving goodbye to our mother, knowing it would be months before we saw her again.

In those days parents only came down to the school once a year, in the summer. There would be things like a 'fathers' cricket match' and a 'mothers' tennis match'. At one of these parents' open days, after the assembly, the headmistress summoned all the girls to her study. Looking

extremely cross, she said, ‘Something very serious happened during assembly, and unless the girl owns up, you will all be punished. A parent, Sir Thomas Cook …’ the founder of the package holiday, incidentally ‘… was squirted in the back of the neck with a water pistol.’

There was silence as everybody looked at each other, wondering what would happen next. But then Caroline Blackwood put her hand up rather slowly and said, ‘Well, actually, it was my mother who did it.’

Her mother, Maureen, Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava, had been wearing a hat with a sculpture of a duck in a pond with water in it. Every time she put her head down, the duck dipped its beak into the pond and, as she moved her head, the water sprayed the unfortunate Sir Thomas. Her hat was not the only extraordinary thing she wore: her shoes had see-through plastic heels with fish in them. They weren’t real, thank goodness, but no wonder Caroline was so eccentric.

I was at school for two years before, in 1945, when I was thirteen, the war finally came to an end. I felt the most enormous sense of relief, although the atmosphere stayed tense. The nation had lost another generation of men and, with the economy taking a huge hit, there wasn’t a feeling of jubilation, only an awareness that life would continue being hard. Most of the staff from Holkham didn’t return after the war and suddenly

my parents were left wondering how they would pay for the upkeep of the estate. My father was a very capable man, but the war had changed him. He had fought in the Battle of El Alamein and managed to survive malaria as well as escaping death back in London: on the morning of 18 June 1944, a migraine stopped him going to the Sunday service held at the Guards' Chapel he often attended with his friends from the Scots Guards.

During the service the chapel took a direct hit, killing 121 people, including a lot of his friends. It was the most serious V1 attack on London during the war and it added to my father's burden of loss. His brother David had fought in the Battle of Britain and survived, only to die of thirst in North Africa when his plane was shot down in the desert.

After the war, my father was even more anxious and easily stressed. At the end of his life, he was plagued by traumatic visions of his time in Egypt.

Although the fighting had ended, my father was posted to Vienna to work with the Allied forces, and in the school holidays Carey and I were put on a train, organised by the Women's Institute, with labels round our necks, and sent to Vienna. We had to pass through the Russian zone and were told not to look the Soviet soldiers in the eye when they inspected the carriages. I was utterly petrified of those men, holding my breath as I stared at the hems of their moth-eaten greatcoats and their black boots, shuddering

as they loomed over us, speaking in Russian.

We stayed in the British quarter in a house that had been requisitioned by Allied forces. By a strange coincidence the house belonged to Austrian friends of my parents, so my father had managed to allow them to stay in their own house, even though they had to move down to the basement. Rationing was strict and parts of Vienna were lawless. The Soviet soldiers patrolled the streets, hurtling down the wide avenues in horse-drawn carriages, piled high with belongings they had looted. The only good thing about being there was that my mother managed to charm some American officers into allowing her to buy dairy products and sugar – something that English people had hardly seen for years – from their PX stores in the American quarter.

Despite the unrest, Sarah's nanny would walk me and my sisters, with my father's army batman, to Hotel Sacher, which was famous for its cakes, especially its 'Sacher Torte', a chocolate cake with apricot filling. We had our fresh ingredients hidden in Sarah's pram, and when we got to the hotel, I would hand the butter and eggs to the pastry chef, who would bake pastries for us that we then collected, hiding them in the pram until we got back to the house. To taste fresh, sweet pastries, especially as a child during a time when that sort of food was extremely rare and coveted, was

wonderful. For those moments all the frightening Soviet soldiers were forgotten and what remained was simply the delicious taste – a huge and precious treat.

Once we were back in England, I returned to school for a few more years, which were particularly tough because the winter of 1946–7 was so cold: temperatures in England dropped to as low as -21 degrees Celsius. With no heating in the school or at Holkham, we all got the most terrible chilblains that would swell and pop, the pain stopping us sleeping.

In 1948, when I was sixteen, I finished school. It wasn't even a consideration that I should go on to university. Neither did I go abroad because there was no money for that – so, like all of my friends, I was sent to the first of my two British finishing schools, Powderham Castle. It was owned by the Earl and Countess of Devon, who had set up a scheme whereby twenty-five girls per year were taught how to run a big house – their big house – under the guise of what was called 'domestic economy'. We were put on fortnightly rotations, shadowing different members of the household, and soon came to know which were bearable and which were not. We loved our time with the butler because he would let us drink the dregs of the wine that we had served guests, who were often our parents' friends. They would peer up at us, amazed to see the daughters of

friends pouring them more wine. The more we poured the more they drank, and the more they drank the more we got to finish off. The butler taught us how to clean silver, which was really hard work – all by thumb, rubbing and rubbing with pink vinegar paste. Our thumbs got terribly sore, but the silver looked wonderful afterwards.

I didn't mind shadowing the cook as a scullery maid – occasionally we were allowed to make drop scones or chocolate cake – or the stint with the gardener, as I enjoyed the flower arranging. But I didn't like being with the housekeeper because she was an absolute stickler for making beds with hospital corners. I went with my friend Mary Birkbeck, who didn't really like people, much preferring dogs and horses. We weren't very interested in being taught social graces. Nor were we focused on finding out how to acquire husbands, and we certainly weren't dying to learn how to run a big house. In fact, we soon made a pact: I did her sewing and work in the house, and she would do my gardening (not the flower arranging) and muck out the horse I had to look after. Any spare time we had was spent on the platform of Dawlish station, smoking. It was the only place we could buy cigarettes – keeping one eye out in case Lord and Lady Devon arrived unexpectedly on the London train.

After months of rotations, we completed the course, and in 1949, I