

City of a scandal

Georgian London wasn't only rocked by the Industrial Revolution, but a series of scandalous affairs and liaisons at the very top echelons of society that regularly made headlines, discovers Carla Passino

Illustrated by Fred van Deelen

It all started with a chunk of Parmesan. George Spencer-Churchill, Marquess of Blandford, sent the cheese, together with seemingly innocent letters, to Lady Mary Anne Sturt, wife of his friend and fellow MP Charles Sturt. But concealed inside the envelopes were passionate love letters: 'I can think of nothing else but you,' wrote the Marquess when he feared she was ill. 'I have never felt such a tremor as I do now!' Unfortunately for him, Sturt chanced upon one of the hidden letters and sued Blandford. Only the vagaries of Georgian politics prevented awkward encounters between the two under the Gothic turrets of the Houses of Parliament: the Marquess had briefly stopped serving during his dalliance and, when he returned, Sturt lost his seat.

Blandford, however, was soon dogged by further ignominy. He was liberal with (borrowed) money, lavishing it on bizarre gardening experiments and rare books—on June 17, 1812, he bid £2,260 to secure a 1471 edition of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. By the end of 1819, creditors were at his heel and he was forced to sell the contents of White Knights, his Berkshire home, including the prized tome.

Blandford's loss was George, 2nd Earl Spencer's gain—he bought the manuscript at less than half the original price. The Earl had been the runner up in the *Decameron*'s auction and, on the evening before the sale, had enjoyed dinner at the St Alban's Tavern, off Pall Mall, with fellow bibliomaniacs. That event morphed into the Roxburghe Club, now the world's oldest bibliophile society, whose members still meet for dinner on or around June 17. Sadly, they can no longer do so at the Tavern. Old St Alban's Street was demolished in the early 19th century, to make way for Regent Street. A cavalcade of grand white buildings now rises where the tavern once hosted not only the Roxburghe members, but also the eponymous St Alban's Tavern group of MPs—surely testament to the quality of the establishment's cuisine and imbibing.

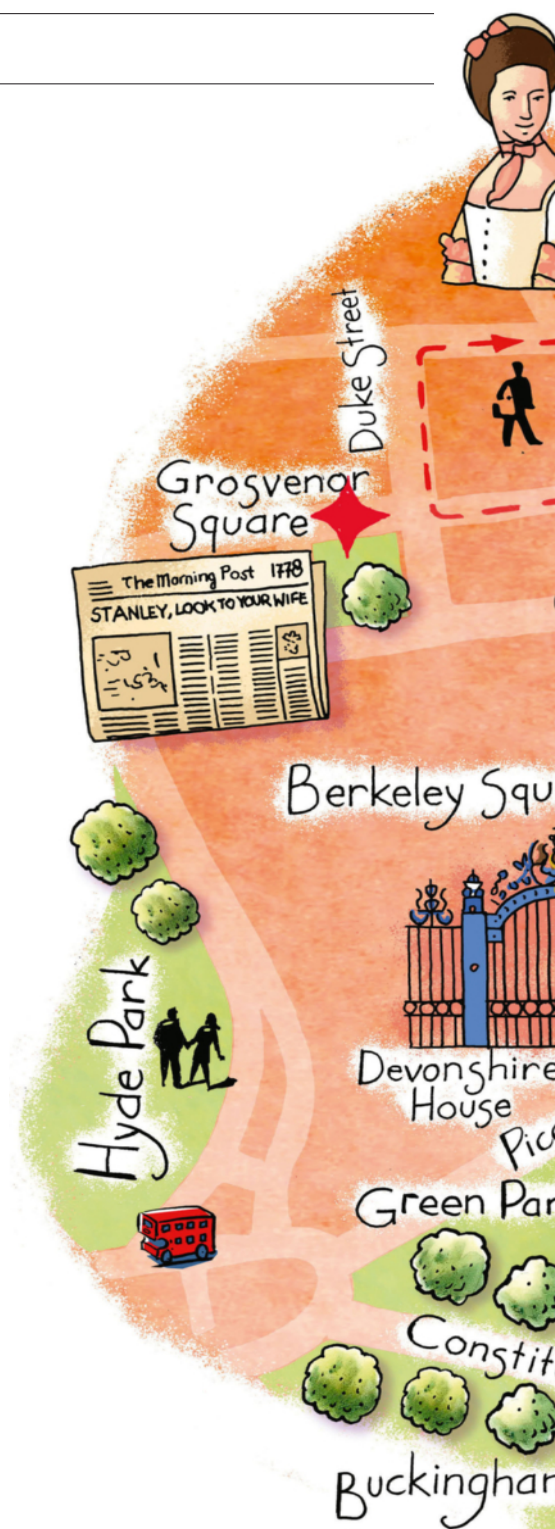
However, Earl Spencer's London home is still very much standing, a triumphant wedding cake of a house, all columns and arches, lording it over Green Park. The building's very origins were steeped in scandal: it was commissioned by John, 1st Earl Spencer, father of the bibliophile, soon after his secret marriage to Georgiana Poyntz. Their romance could have almost been the plot of a bodice-ripper novel: the rich, handsome, but frail lord falls for the lovely, clever maid who is well 'below his station'. In 1755, the couple slipped upstairs during a crowded ball at Althorp and got married in secret by the local vicar with only their respective mothers as witnesses. Once the news became public, it was met with predictable disdain—Horace Walpole dismissed the bride as 'a mere Miss Poyntz'.

There could have been no better way to bury the sneers, however, than with a building that moved Arthur Young to write: 'I know not in England, a more beautiful piece of architecture'—Spencer House's early neo-Classical interiors and its whimsical Palm Room, featuring gilded palm trees, would entertain London's *beau monde* for centuries to come. And however shocking the Spencer marriage might have seemed, it paled by comparison with the life of their daughters, particularly the eldest, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. Dubbed 'Empress of Fashion'—she was quite literally ranked by publications of the time at the top of the style scales—the Duchess shared her home and her husband with her best friend, Lady Elizabeth Foster.

The arrangement sparked extraordinary rumours, including that her son, the Marquess of Hartington, was actually Lady Elizabeth's illegitimate child with the Duke. Georgiana later embarked on a string of affairs, the first of which required a strategic spell in France to birth an illegitimate child. But perhaps the impropriety that prompted the press to heap the most scorn on her was

that she meddled in politics—a 1784 print shows her in the arms of a common man, with the caption: 'A certain Dutchess kissing old Swelter-in-Grease the Butcher for his Vote. O! Times! O! Manners! The Women wear Breeches, the Men Petticoats.'

Nonetheless, even Georgiana Devonshire was not a patch on Henrietta, Lady Grosvenor, wife of Richard, then 1st Baron Grosvenor. The leafy surroundings and genteel houses of Cavendish Square hardly seem the setting for a tawdry affair, but it was there that, during a soirée in 1769, the hostess, Camilla, →





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Cavendish Square

Henrietta Place

Oxford Street

New Bond Street

are

cadilly

Spencer House

ution Hill

n Palace

ctoria Street

ST ALBANS TAVERN

Former St Alban's Tavern

Pall Mall

The Mall

St James's Palace

St James's Park

Birdcage Walk

Great George Street

Parliament Square

Abingdon Street

Fred van Deelen '22

Victoria Embankment Gardens

RIVER THAMES

Westminster Br.

Palace of Westminster

Victoria Tower Gardens South

Countess D'Onhoff, found Lady Grosvenor 'lying upon her back... with her petticoats up', enjoying the manly attentions of none other than George III's brother, Henry, Duke of Cumberland and Strathearn. Eventually, Lord Grosvenor's butler caught her and Cumberland *in flagrante*. The Baron sued the Duke and the press had a field day as the court proceedings revealed every lurid detail, from Lady Grosvenor's 'very much rumped and loose' hair after her outings, to Cumberland's inadequate love prose and ludicrous disguises, not least when he and his manservant dressed like farmers but fooled no one, because 'they could not talk much as farmers'. Despite this, Lady Grosvenor managed to prevent her husband from divorcing her. As for Cumberland, he continued to court controversy: after a sequence of mistresses, he married Anne, widow of commoner Christopher Horton, in 1771, prompting a furious George III to kick his wayward brother from the court.

Not that the crenellated walls of St James's Palace were strangers to spectacular fallings out: George I had banished George II, who, in turn, had thrown out Frederick, Prince of Wales, whom the King called 'my half-witted coxcomb'. Even so, the British were far more outraged by George II's journeys to Hanover to tend to his German affairs (and the

considerable charms of his mistress Amalie von Wallmoden) than by the royal feuds. In his memoirs, John, Baron Hervey, recalls an advertisement pasted on St James's gate: 'Lost or strayed out of this house, a man who has left a wife and six children on the parish; whoever will give any tidings of him... shall receive four shillings and sixpence reward. N.B. This reward will not be increased, nobody judging him to deserve a Crown.'

'The title of the Georgian era's most infamous rake must go to the 3rd Duke of Dorset, "a keen collector of women"'

The title of the Georgian era's most infamous rake, however, must go to John Sackville, 3rd Duke of Dorset, 'a keen collector of women', according to Robert Sackville-West's *Inheritance: The Story of Knole and the Sackvilles*. His house at 38, Grosvenor Square—now clad in the whitewashed dignity of its Victorian front, but then a triumph of green bed furnishings, green drapes and plaster Venus—may have borne witness to his most scandalous

tryst—with Elizabeth, Countess of Derby. Unhappily married to squab Edward Stanley, 12th Earl of Derby, the Countess sought refuge in Dorset's arms and must have done so less than discreetly because, by 1778, the papers started making thinly veiled allusions: 'Stanley, look to your wife,' printed *The Morning Post*. Then, Elizabeth made a move that sent shockwaves through Society—in 1779, she left her husband for her lover. For a while, everyone held their breath to see whether she'd end up marrying the Duke. But the Earl of Derby refused to divorce, Dorset grew bored and the town felt free to turn its collective back on her.

Elizabeth was forced to settle in Europe and only her husband's ensuing fall from grace helped her return to London, according to Hannah Greig's *The Beau Monde*. Derby had become enamoured of actress Elizabeth Farren who shrewdly resisted his advances. The press savaged him—a print shows the portly Earl on a horse behind Farren's carriage, with the caption: 'When I follow'd a lass that was forward & shy, Oh I stuck to her stuff but she would not comply.' In the end, however, he had the last laugh: Lady Derby died, he married his actress and went down in history not for the scandals, but for having launched the horse race that still bears his name. 🐾

At home in scandalous London



Queen Anne's Gate, £6.41 million

This development brings together the best of old and new—the Grade II-listed façade hides 27 apartments beautifully created by design house Linley with architects PDP London. This property has 2,022sq ft of accommodation, with three bedrooms. *Beauchamp Estates* (020-7722 4000; www.beauchamp.com)



Adams Row, £11.95 million

This 3,872sq ft Mayfair house is well suited to entertaining with the main reception room spanning the width of the property. The master bedroom has a terrace, plus there are three more bedrooms, a cinema room, gym and steam room. *Harrods Estates* (020-7409 9001; www.harrodsestates.com)



Upper Grosvenor Street, £2.999 million

Set on the third floor of this elegant building, Flat 21 enjoys fine views across the Mayfair rooftops. The 1,097sq ft accommodation includes two bedrooms, an airy reception room and a separate kitchen and dining room. *Carter Jonas* (020-7493 0676; www.carterjonas.co.uk)