

Oxfordshire

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Limited Edition

incorporating Intuition

Inside the real 'Downton Abbey'

Lady Carnarvon
reveals why the real
stories from
Highclere are more
fascinating than
the fiction

Recollections from the 1907 Oxford Pageant

How scrapbooks
take us behind
the scenes at an
event that
took over
the city

On location with Lady Carnarvon

No-one was more surprised at the success of the ITV series *Downton Abbey* than Lady Carnarvon. Her home, the Jacobean-style Highclere Castle, near Newbury, has been the main location for the award-winning show since it first aired in September 2010.

The series, created by writer Julian Fellowes, and set in a fictional Yorkshire country estate, depicts the lives of the aristocratic Crawley family and their servants in the post-Edwardian era.

Downton, now in its fifth series, is the most successful British costume drama series since the 1981 television serialisation of *Brideshead Revisited* – and is the most widely watched television drama, with huge audiences in the USA, China and Japan.

All of which means that Highclere Castle has become one of the best-known stately homes in the world.

And it turns out the real stories of Highclere are every bit as colourful as Julian Fellowes' fiction.

Fiona Aitken, wife of the 8th Earl of Carnarvon, was born in London in 1963. She was the eldest of six daughters. Fiona's father, Ronnie, worked in the City.

She said: "I enjoyed a privileged childhood with a wonderful mother, Frances, and a nanny who is still part of the family. Our grandparents lived just around the corner. There were walks in St James Park and much more."

Lady Carnarvon fondly recalls family summer holidays at Polzeath in Cornwall.

"It was very much an outdoors type of holiday with football on the beach, rock climbing, shrimping and lots of walking. Loads of friends would come down and stay. But it was not as fashionable a place as it is now."

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Sylva Vetta visits
Highclere Castle,
better known to fans of
the long-running
television drama as
Downton Abbey, and
meets the woman who
keeps the stately home
running smoothly



**Lady
Carnarvon at
Highclere
Castle with her
much-loved pet
dogs**

**Photograph:
© Highclere Castle**



In this series we ask our subjects what favourite item — perhaps a book, antique or painting — they would like to take with them to the fictional island of Oxtopia.

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I asked about her education.

"My first school was unusual. Hampshire School was run by the mother and sister of actress Susan Hampshire. I remember it as happy place with lots of dancing. It was lovely to welcome Susan here recently for a fundraising event for a dyslexia charity."

The school began with just a few children around a table in the dance studio where Susan Hampshire's mother June, taught ballet.

As it grew, other teachers were taken on, and she took over St Saviour's Hall in Knightsbridge, opposite Harrods. She soon had about 60 pupils, but there were never more than about eight in one class.

Susan Hampshire makes an ideal ambassador for dyslexia awareness as she has always talked openly about living with the condition herself.

Lady Carnarvon described her secondary education at St Paul's Girls School.

"All the teachers were excellent. They instilled confidence in us to read and discuss what we had read. I was already a bookworm. I had various inspirational English teachers, Mrs Hall and Miss Gough. Thanks to them I have an abiding love of the metaphysical poets.

"My father wanted us to be good at languages. He particularly loves Schiller and Goethe. I took English, History and German at A-Level."

She felt her German could do with improving so, after her exams, she took a gap year in Germany, working in a clothing factory.

It must have helped as 1984 saw Lady Carnarvon heading for St Andrews University in Fife, where she read English and German, as well as learning to fish and going on hikes.

"We discovered we had a mutual interest in First World War poetry. Afterwards he sent me a book of poetry, which I still have. We soon realised we shared so many interests"

"My father's family is Scottish so I saw it as an opportunity to explore that beautiful part of Great Britain," she said.

"In those days St Andrews was completely unspoiled. It had one coffee shop, one supermarket, a chemist, a fish and chip shop and a shop which sold watercolours. I made a huge number of wonderful friends there.

"During most holidays, I worked as a temp to pay back what I had overspent during term time. Those experiences gave me an insight into different kinds of work opportunities. I decided I wanted to be a management consultant but realised I needed a particular skill.

"I thought either a qualification in law or accountancy would make me employable. I qualified as a chartered accountant with Coopers and Lybrand."

Lady Carnarvon, a prolific author, believes the experience has helped her writing.

"When you are confronted with an idea, you need to organise your thoughts, do research and analyse the results. You have to try to assess what is accurate and then present your statement of accounts. For both accountancy



Lady Carnarvon and her husband Geordie, the eighth Earl, at Highclere Castle

and for my books, you have to have the reader in mind."

It was through a book that she and the eighth Earl, George 'Geordie' Herbert, met in 1996. They were seated next to one another at a charity dinner. At the time the Earl was coping with the end of his first marriage, which had produced a daughter, Saoirse, and a son George.

Lady Carnarvon said: "We discovered we had a mutual interest in First World War poetry. Afterwards he sent me a book of poetry, which I still have. We soon realised we also shared so many interests including tennis, the countryside and mutual friends."

They married in February, 1999, and their son Edward was born in October of that year, two months after the death of Frances, Fiona's mother.

I asked Lady Carnarvon if she had worried

about what she would be taking on when she married the Earl?

"I did not really think about it at the time. Geordie's grandfather had lived until he was 90 and I assumed his father Henry would be around for decades. So, it was a shock when he died just two years after our marriage.

"I was lucky that I had time to get to know him, as Geordie is so similar to his father."

Her father-in-law, Henry Herbert, loved horse racing and was manager of the Queen's stables. The Queen was a frequent visitor to Highclere until the seventh Earl's death in 2001. Lady Carnarvon said: "When he died I did not think about how it would change our lives – only about trying to comfort his grieving son."

For the past 11 years she has managed the

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house which has been in the Carnarvon family since 1679.

"I learn more each day from the people I am working with," Lady Carnarvon said.

Diana, the housekeeper, has been here for 25 years, and some of the others have been here for 50 years. I am not trying to dictate to them but, in the end, I am responsible and we are trying to create the income to continue to employ them. We work together as a community.

"I love this house but maintaining it and finding a way to make it relevant in the twenty first century is a huge responsibility. I always worry about the community that sustains it and how to maintain their jobs."

Before *Downton*, managing the house and estate was far from easy. As of 2009, repairs needed for the estate were estimated to cost at around £12m – £1.8m of which was urgently needed for the castle alone. Thanks to the *Downton* effect – with visitor numbers rocketing – the financial future of Highclere looks safe.

Lady Carnarvon said: "For Highclere to be a real home, we needed to undertake a lot of work especially to the bedrooms and bathrooms. I wanted to bring my sisters and their families here often and fill it with warmth and love."

Then there are the friends they regularly entertain – one of which was the writer Julian Fellowes.

"After he wrote the screenplay for the movie *Gosford Park*, Julian tried to get it filmed here, but the director, Robert Altman, chose to set it elsewhere."

But Fellowes was soon to return with *Downton Abbey*, and the rest is television history.

"We hoped at best that it might be like *Brideshead Revisited* – a TV series followed by a film," Lady Carnarvon recalled. But the drama turned out to be a huge success and inspired Lady Carnarvon to pick up her pen and tell some of the real stories from Highclere's rich history.

"Once I realised there would be a second series, I threw myself into a real historical book and called it *Lady Almira and the Real Downton Abbey*. It was a great opportunity to reach a big audience."

Almira was the illegitimate daughter of the banking tycoon, Alfred de Rothschild, who married the fifth Earl. The book, published by Hodder and Stoughton, has since been sold in more than 20 countries.

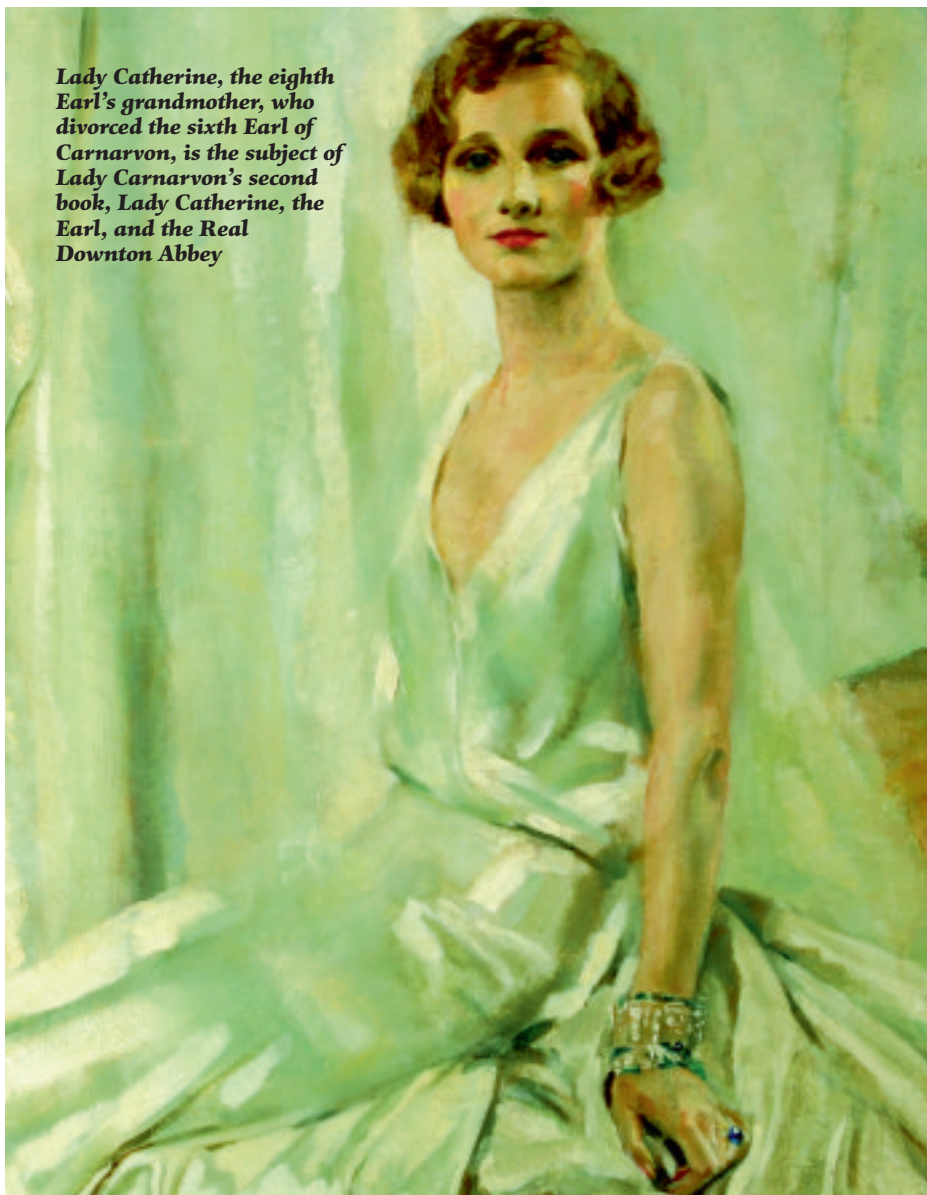
In the Morning Room at Highclere where I interviewed Lady Carnarvon hangs a portrait of a pale and slender woman, with a 1920s bob, wearing an elegant white silk dress.

She was the American-born Lady Catherine, Georgie's grandmother, who divorced the sixth Earl of Carnarvon, the philandering Porchey and was the subject of Lady Carnarvon's second book, *Lady Catherine, the Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey*.

Lady Carnarvon said: "For this book I concentrated on researching the 1920s and 1930s – the story of the Wall Street crash and all the economic struggles and hardship for many in the 1930s, leading to the success of the Labour Party after the Second World War and the introduction of the welfare state still has relevance today."

And she has plans to write more books.

Lady Catherine, the eighth Earl's grandmother, who divorced the sixth Earl of Carnarvon, is the subject of Lady Carnarvon's second book, *Lady Catherine, the Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey*



"Before 1679, Highclere was the home of the Bishops of Winchester from the eighth century. I want to write about that period."

That should be of interest locally because the medieval bishops of Winchester were hugely significant to Oxford, particularly William of Wykeham who founded New College and New College School in 1379.

She also writes a blog and is currently working on a cookery book with anecdotes and recipes from the last 200 years.

"I enjoy writing my blog and you learn a lot from the responses you get," Lady Carnarvon said. "People are interested in the traditional recipes we have used at different times. I like trying them out with our chef."

"I also have an ambition to write about the gardens (designed by Capability Brown) and about Charles Barry the architect of the house. Not forgetting Egypt. I wrote about George Herbert, the fifth Earl in my book *Egypt at Highclere: The Discovery of Tutankhamun*. He was not just an enthusiastic photographer but a respected professional."

"He became a pioneer of colour photography and was asked to be President of the Camera Club in 1916. That is another book waiting to be written."

Last year Lady Carnarvon and her husband

were in Oxford to officially launch the the *Discovering Tutankhamun* exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum.

The eighth Earl's great-grandfather was the enthusiastic amateur Egyptologist who sponsored the excavation of nobles' tombs in Thebes in 1907 and accompanied Howard Carter during the discovery of the young Pharaoh's tomb in 1922.

Lady Carnarvon also helped set up the Egypt exhibition in the basement at Highclere. She and her husband have collaborated with the Ashmolean and the British Museum in preparation for the 100th anniversary of the discovery of the tomb.

We had not talked much about Lady Carnarvon's castaway choice.

"Can I take my husband, my son, my horse and dogs?" she said. I did not enjoy disappointing her.

"Then it has to be books – and the war poets and Metaphysical poets are not enough. I would like to take the Highclere library. That should keep me occupied."

"Geordie and I are both avid readers. There are always piles of books on either side of the bed. While we usually read different books we both love reading and discussing what we have read."