

The sins of the father

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Body

There was a time when the Maxwell name commanded the best restaurant tables in London. Matre d's fawned.

Sommeliers bowed. Not any more. Just a week before the disgraced late media baron Robert Maxwell was disclosed by newly released Foreign Office papers as 'almost certainly' having been a Russian spy, I found myself staring down at the name 'Maxwell' adjacent to my own in Locanda Locatelli's lunch bookings for the day.

I suppose it is a common enough surname.

But considering this was one of London's most impossibly trendy, power-lunching restaurants exactly the sort of see-and-be-seen-in place to which you would take clients you were trying to impress my first reaction was to wonder if the booking was for one of 'those' Maxwells.

A few minutes later, when Kevin Maxwell walks in, a strange, almost embarrassed hush descends over the restaurant. It's 12 years since Robert Maxwell's mysterious death at sea, when it was revealed he had debts of over 2 billion, including some 450 million that he had robbed from the Daily Mirror pension fund. People still do not like the idea of Kevin Maxwell who recently took a 75 per cent pay cut (to just 40,000 a year) as chairman of his troubled telecommunications company, Telemonde eating out in a flashy London restaurant.

Heads turn with the same cranial fascination as if it were Claus von Bulow during his New York murder trial, or John Leslie at the height of his rape allegations scandal. Unlike von Bulow, who once remarked that the one good thing about being charged with the attempted murder of his heiress wife was that during his trial he got the best restaurant tables in New York, Maxwell is led towards a table in the Kazakhstan region of the restaurant. No wonder mouths gape. This is a man who received 12 million in legal aid when he escaped jail and was cleared of fraud in 1996.

I encounter Maxwell by the coat rack, where I secure his email address, but when I contact him, he replies: 'My rule for some time has been to limit my personal involvement on articles unless there is some news that merits coverage or requires a response.' All he is happy to confirm is that his eldest daughter, Tilly, has just started as an undergraduate at St Peter's College, Oxford, clearly something which is a source of pride to Kevin, who read history and modern languages at Balliol in the early Eighties. Kevin and Pandora have another six children, all of whom are apparently very bright, being highly gifted either musically or mathematically (despite his financial ruin, his children have been educated privately at St Andrew's in Pangbourne, Berkshire, paid for by relatives or godparents). Just as almost all of his six siblings went to Oxford, Kevin is hoping that his own brood will follow in the one Maxwell family tradition that it is acceptable to brag about.

The Maxwell offspring you may already know of are 44-year-old Kevin, Britain's biggest-ever bankrupt, his older but less clever brother Ian, 47, widely regarded as his father's most willing stooge, and 42-year-old Ghislaine, Captain Bob's favourite daughter, 'friend' and social fixer to Bill Clinton, Prince Andrew and her saturnine sometime

The sins of the father

boyfriend, New York financier and property mogul Jeffrey Epstein a man labelled 'International Moneyman of Mystery' by New York magazine and with a past almost as intriguing as her late father's.

But what is it like to live as a Maxwell, knowing that when your infamous father either fell or jumped overboard from his yacht, *The Lady Ghislaine*, on 5 November 1991, he left behind a reputation as one of the 20th century's most nefarious liars and serial fraudsters? (Betty Maxwell, his 83-year-old widow, now lives in a modest flat in Pimlico where she gives talks on subjects such as 'Protestant responses to the Holocaust'. She believes that her late husband was murdered.) The continuing social backlash against the Maxwell family heirs is a peculiarly English form of revenge drama. Largely invisible, and unspoken, it remains nevertheless lethal in its execution and effects. A good example is the attempted sale of Kevin and Pandora's 14-bedroom country mansion, Moulsoford Manor, near Henley in Oxfordshire. A few weeks ago, it was suddenly withdrawn from the market by Kevin Maxwell after it failed to sell after six months. 'They will never get what they want for it,' sniffs a neighbour down at the local riverside hotel. 'It's tainted by the Maxwell name.' Bought in 1994, following Kevin's bankruptcy, by his parents-in-law, John and Ruth Warnford-Davis, for 600,000, and later bought from them by Kevin, Moulsoford Manor was on sale for an optimistic 2,950,000.

The glossy sales brochure includes a laboriously detailed history of all the previous owners of the manor, going back to the Fitzwalter family, who lived in the house for 400 years up to 1497, the Gifford family legal advisers to Charles II who lived in the house until 1742, and the Morrell family, who lasted until 1907. Potential purchasers are informed that the mansion then became a hotel, and then a nursing school.

At no point is there a whisper of the Maxwell family.

Yet when a friend who had been interested in the property told me about a tour of the house, it seems the Maxwell imprint is all too evident wherever you walk. Hanging in Kevin's panelled dining room, for example, is a rogue's gallery of Robert Maxwell scandal-related newspaper cartoons, along with the framed *Private Eye* cover after Kevin was cleared of fraud in 1996. Notwithstanding the extraordinary Day-Glo purple and lime green schemes of the rooms, and the extraordinary mess everywhere, the house is very odd inside, and certainly not a base for entertaining.

But then the Maxwells, in common with many rich and dysfunctional families, were never a social dynasty. Nor are they today with the exception of Ghislaine, and she isn't married or a mother. A City friend who knew Kevin Maxwell at Oxford said that social discomfort, born out of bullying by their domineering father, had always been a hallmark of the Maxwell boys. My friend remembers going to bizarre Sunday lunches at the Maxwells' Oxford family seat, Headington Hill Hall, the Victorian mansion that Captain Bob leased from Oxford City Council and which he called 'the finest council house in England'.

'Kevin and Ian would be sitting at the lunch table and their father would unleash a torrent of verbal abuse at them, telling them they were next to useless, right in front of their friends.

Ghislaine never seemed to get treated like that, which is why, perhaps, she has remained the socially gregarious one. But Ian and Kevin just retreated into their shells, afraid to ever open their mouths,' my friend said.

But Ian and Kevin have always been different, and remain so today, with Kevin very much the driving force of the family, despite his deep troubles with *Telemonde*. Nowhere is this more apparent than in their choice of wives.

Although Robert Maxwell did not approve of Kevin's wife, Pandora Warnford-Davis the feisty Heathfield and Eton-educated (Eton does not usually take girls but Pandora was part of an 'experiment' some years ago) daughter of a middleclass father who made car number plates and snooker balls she has at least stood by Kevin throughout his ordeal (she famously swore at the two policemen who came to arrest her husband, thinking they were reporters) over the last decade.

Ian's judgement was less sound. He married a former star college basketball player and catwalk model from the American Midwest called Laura Marie Plumb.

The sins of the father

Her father owned a spraying systems company. She met Ian when she came to London to start a career in a cable television company that Robert Maxwell was interested in acquiring. Ian ended up acquiring Laura as his wife. Three months later, though, Captain Bob was dead. The marriage floundered and she was back home in the States feeling as if she had been the victim of an English class system which had turned against her.

Ian has since married 37-year-old Tara Dudley Smith, the daughter of a Jockey Club steward and an ex-army officer. Both Ian and Kevin eventually plumped for solid English girls and as wholesome a family life as they could manage, while Ghislaine, Robert's favourite child who inherited his charisma and social ambition, has remained in America hunting the excitement she craves.

Of all the Maxwell siblings, Ghislaine remains the most complex. After a decade in Manhattan, where she lives in a luxurious \$6 million house, the clever, flirtatious, manipulative and socially ambitious Ghislaine has risen, largely thanks to property developer Epstein bankrolling her, to become queen of the billionaires' social circuit.

'Jeffrey only likes billionaires or very young women and he uses Ghislaine as his social pimp,' says a New York insider who knows them both. 'He is very reclusive you very rarely see him out in New York and he basically sends out Ghislaine, who is very social and charismatic, and can speak a great many languages.

And when he has these dinners at one of his houses, there are all these young women that she has provided for him.' Salacious reports have crossed the Atlantic about Ghislaine hosting bizarre parties at her house to which she invites a dozen or so young girls, then brandishes a whip and teaches them how to improve their sexual techniques.

'Nobody knows where she got the money to buy her house,' adds a New York source. 'Everybody assumes it must have come from Jeffrey.' Or else, say others, she has been able to tap into the 'lost' Maxwell millions which have never been located, despite the efforts of police and FBI on both sides of the Atlantic. Certainly, the detectives who interviewed her after her father's death were not convinced of her sackcloth-and-ashes plea. Whatever her protestations of poverty, she certainly does not seem to want for anything; except, that is, a superwealthy husband. And Jeffrey certainly fits that bill. A former maths teacher, he is said to run a \$15 billion fund for rich clients, he comes with a fleet of aeroplanes and is rumoured to be Bill Clinton's new benefactor.

But with Epstein seemingly refusing to marry her, Ghislaine has recently been spending more time in London where she remains a close friend of and 'social fixer' to Prince Andrew.

They make an unlikely duo, but their regard for each other is such that they have been on over a dozen trips together in the past few years, including the Duke of York holding a birthday party at Sandringham for Ghislaine, and her reciprocating by inviting him to a 'hookers and pimps' party in New York attended by her A-list pals, who include Heidi Klum, Flavio Briatore and Bill Clinton.

Somehow Ghislaine always manages to get herself photographed. Cynics say that this is because she knows Epstein is impressed by her social contacts, and she will apparently do 'anything' to convince him that only 'she' can provide the full royal flush of entry cards to the social life he wants.

'Ghislaine says she hates the press but, like Princess Diana, will happily use the press ruthlessly when it suits her,' says one English friend.

'She is very glamorous and really good fun,' adds a New York friend, 'but I think it is a tragedy that she seems so obsessed with money.

If only she could free herself from Jeffrey Epstein. Ghislaine is in love with this man, but perhaps he is not in love with her. It is kind of sad.

Ghislaine would like to settle down and have children but she is terrified of being poor.

A lot of people say the reason she stays with Jeffrey is because he reminds her of her father.

The sins of the father

He can sometimes be unkind, people say.' There are, of course, other members of the Maxwell dynasty if that is the right word who you almost never hear about. Of Robert Maxwell's seven children, one you will never see lunching at Locanda Locatelli is Philip, 53, the tycoon's eldest son, a scientist and mathematician who won a scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford, aged 16. But he barely spoke to his father after he defied his wishes to marry an Argentinian girl called Nilda in 1977 (they are now separated).

Known as 'poor Philip', he was last reported to be living in a 65a-week bedsit in Golders Green, where he was meant to be writing a book about his father. It shows no signs of being published.

The other anonymous Maxwells are his eldest daughter Anne, 55, a former actress who read Italian and French at St Hugh's College, Oxford and eventually became a teacher. In Tom Bower's Maxwell: The Final Verdict, the author recounts a joke that Robert Maxwell used to tell about his daughter: 'What have Anne and Pope John Paul got in common? Both are ugly and both are failed actors.' But the two children who seem to have inherited the lion's share of their father's entrepreneurial skill are twin sisters Christine and Isabel, aged 52. Apparently, with younger brother Kevin's help, they created an internet search engine called Magellan which they sold to a competitor for 11.25 million worth of shares. Christine is married to a French astronomer, and they live in San Francisco and Aix-en-Provence. Isabel also lives in California with her son Alex in a 650,000 apartment. The twins may be low-key but they are highly, and legally, solvent.

Of the seven children, it is Kevin Maxwell's personal mission in life to restore the family name. A senior banker with Goldman Sachs who worked with Kevin before his father's death says that he was in 'total awe' of his father, and was consumed by an overwhelming desire to be his 'dad reincorporated'.

During his Old Bailey trial for fraud, Kevin admitted that he fell to pieces after his father's death, saying he 'missed his presence and ability to dominate'.

'He was very close to his father,' recalls the banker. 'The idea that he didn't know what was going on inside Maxwell Communications was very surprising to me. But I haven't seen him in the past ten years. He has just dropped off the social radar. Kevin

sees his role as being the one who is going to put the fortune back together again.' After being cleared of fraud, Kevin went on the dole to show that he was prepared to pay his dues to society. In 1995, his bankruptcy was automatically discharged after the mandatory three years. Then he set up Telemonde, his USbased commercial vehicle for the Maxwell comeback story.

When it floated in 1999, it looked as if Kevin Maxwell was on course to becoming a multimillionaire; on paper he owned a seven per cent stake, worth 16 million.

But today, with his company in serious trouble after overpaying for his fibre-optic telecommunication stock, Kevin's Maxwell dynastic rehabilitation programme is far from going to plan.

Telemonde (of which he now owns less than three per cent) is now very much on the skids, with massive debts, no working capital and Maxwell can hardly afford to pay himself, let alone his employees. The company website is permanently down, and apparently he can't even afford a secretary. When I made a call at midday last Thursday, I got an answeringmachine message. No Maxwell fortune is going to be rebuilt without somebody available to answer the office phone. One feels it may well take yet another generation for the Maxwell dynasty to rise up from the ashes of public humiliation and disgrace.

END

Graphic

The sins of the father

(1) KEVIN MAXWELL 'S MOULSFORD MANOR WAS FOR SALE AT 2.95M (2) 'I'M REALLY LOOKING FORWARD TO DEFENDING MYSELF,' KEVIN MAXWELL TELLS THE PRESS AS HE IS CHARGED WITH FRAUD IN 1992 (3) IAN MAXWELL AND HIS FIRST WIFE, LAURA (4) KEVIN MAXWELL AND HIS WIFE PANDORA WITH THEIR CHILDREN IN 1996 (5) LEFT: GHISLAINE WAS PRINCE ANDREW'S DATE AT THE WEDDING OF HIS FORMER GIRLFRIEND, AURELIA CECIL. ABOVE: TWIN ENTREPRENEURS CHRISTINE AND ISABEL HAVE MADE MILLIONS. RIGHT: PRINCE ANDREW WITH HEIDI KLUM AT THE HOOKERS AND PIMPS PARTY IN NEW YORK. BELOW: CAPTAIN BOB AND HIS YACHT, THE LADY GHISLAINE

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