

Mysterious business of the queen of NY-Lon

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Body

Ghislaine Maxwell, ruler of an elite transatlantic set, has a life as secretive as her father's, writes Saskia Sissons

An oversized Jeep draws up outside the Nag's Head pub in the heart of London's Belgravia village. At the wheel is a razor-thin woman, dressed down but chic in jeans and a sweatshirt. Her face is scrubbed free of make-up and her dark hair is tucked under that distinctive trademark of her late father - a New York Yankees baseball cap.

In a part of town where royalty and celebrities pass unnoticed, locals are unfazed by the brief appearances of Ghislaine Maxwell. But my neighbours and I watch amused as, swigging from a bottle of beer, she flirts with the barman, oblivious to the traffic building up behind her in the narrow cobbled street.

Ever since the disgraced publishing tycoon Robert Maxwell plunged to his death in 1991 from the yacht he named after her, Ghislaine has lived a transatlantic lifestyle, dividing her time between London, where she owns a Pounds 1m mews house, and her base in New York, where she has established herself as a prominent figure on the Manhattan social scene.

An American acquaintance says: "The reason she has men eating out of her hand is she manages to make them feel sexy and fascinating.

"She's an outrageous flirt and fascinated by dodgy, powerful men. It's all part of her Electra complex."

Her new life has enabled the 39-year-old Oxford graduate to realise a vaulting social ambition as queen of NY-Lon society - the transatlantic New York-London elite identified last week by Newsweek magazine - who notch up countless Air Miles commuting between the twin business and cultural capital cities of the world.

Typically in their thirties, well-off, well-connected and unattached, the NY-Lon set work hard, play hard and inhabit a private social universe that spans the Atlantic. Many, such as the actress Liz Hurley and model Sophie Dahl, are trying to reinvent themselves.

The surprise addition to Ghislaine's NY-Lon circle is Prince Andrew, who since he turned 40 earlier this year has been increasingly drawn to her social orbit, accompanying her on a hectic schedule of private parties and celebrity functions here and in America. In February they sat side by side at a Ralph Lauren fashion show in New York; in June she was his guest at the royal birthday bash given by the Queen at Windsor Castle. Despite their public appearances, they took pains to remain several paces apart in front of photographers at the September wedding of Aurelia Cecil, the Duke of York's old flame.

Last week they were pictured together - she dressed as a prostitute in gold lame and fright wig and he looking dishevelled in business suit and white shirt - at a Manhattan S&M Hallowe'en party thrown by the underwear model Heidi Klum.

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Until now, they had both been drawn to New York for the same reason. Ghislaine had found that in New York she could do as she pleased without fear of censure. Nor was her family name such a burden.

As her long-time friend Elizabeth Saltzman, the fashion director of Vanity Fair, puts it: "New York gave her the freedom to go ahead and be creative whether it was in business or socially.

"Ghislaine's fun, she's energetic and she makes things happen. She's a people gatherer, but she's no bimbo. She's a smart operator with a huge intellect and people in New York respect her for that."

Yet, for all her high-profile appearances on Manhattan's A-list merry-go round, she is secretive to the point of paranoia and her business affairs are deeply mysterious.

Ghislaine's early career was entirely dependent on her father's patronage. Unlike her male siblings, whom he bullied mercilessly, she was largely spared his notoriously volatile temper as he set her up with a string of jobs across his business empire.

He made her a director of Oxford United, included her on the payroll of The European news-

paper and provided her with a ready-made company, Maxwell Corporate Gifts, to run in New York. Although her apparent lack of ambition infuriated him, when he took control of the city's biggest-circulation newspaper, the Daily News, he nevertheless appointed her to a nebulous role in charge of "special projects". This provided her with her entree to the power base of the city.

Although she owns her own apartment on the Upper East Side, Ghislaine chooses to live with Jeffrey Epstein, a wealthy financier who now works for Leslie Wexner, owner of the upmarket lingerie outfit Victoria's Secret. "He's Mr Enigmatic. Nobody knows whether he's a concert pianist, property developer, a CIA agent, a math teacher or a member of Mossad," says a New York social observer.

"Jeffrey provides some financial support and he's always kept her secrets, but nobody knows what their relationship is really about."

Meanwhile, Ghislaine has been discreetly building up a business empire as opaque as her father's. She describes herself as an "internet operator" but her office in Manhattan refuses to confirm even the name or the nature of her business.

What is known is that she had a substantial interest in Magellan, a pioneering internet search engine set up by her elder twin sisters, Isabel and Christine, and sold to ExCite in 1996.

She is probably as upset as Prince Andrew at the unwelcome publicity last week. Photographs of the Queen's favourite son and the daughter of one of Britain's most notorious fraudsters comforting each other as they left the party in the early hours of the morning would not have pleased either of them. The prince has since protested to the Press Complaints Commission about an article that seemed to implicate some of his American friends with drugs.

Contrary to persistent rumours, his friendship with Ghislaine is platonic. Clearly weary of denying a relationship between them, a Buckingham Palace spokesman sighed: "They're good friends and they've known each other for a long time. I believe they were introduced by the Duchess of York."

Ghislaine is one of an assembly line of women introduced to Andrew by his former wife. Like Fergie, she is strong, feisty and loves to party. She is known to her friends as "Good-Time Ghislaine", but she may finally have had one good time too many for the NY-Lon set, which has thrived by networking out of the public eye.

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