

## Great Estates

# Flourishing fruits of a bitter family feud

Eviction from their aristocratic estate led to the launch of a new business. Georgina Fuller reports

If you read a story about a successful, independent woman marrying into an idiosyncratic, aristocratic British family and finding herself on the receiving end of unwelcome hostility, you might think it sounds familiar.

When Kelsey Seymour, Countess of Yarmouth, married her husband, William, Earl of Yarmouth, son and heir to the Marquess of Hertford and the bucolic 6,000-acre Ragley Hall estate in Warwickshire, in June 2018, she already knew any hopes she may have had of being embraced into the fold were never going to be realised.

"On return from our honeymoon, it was made abundantly clear to us, by William's parents, Harry and Bea, that there would be no place or benefit for either of us in the 'family business' and that has remained the case," Lady Yarmouth says.

Quite what the Hertford family, whose ancestry includes not one but two wives of Henry VIII, had against Lady Yarmouth, who was working as an executive director at Goldman Sachs when she met Lord Yarmouth at a mutual friend's wedding in 2016, has never been disclosed.

Lady Carolyn Seymour, Lord Yarmouth's aunt, who has a house on the Ragley Hall estate, ridiculed them for their "embarrassingly awful" wedding invitation and using the wrong font. Then his mother, the Marchioness of Hertford, emailed him before the wedding to say there were "no funds available for supporting two generations at the same time" nor "any obligations as to when or what is handed over".

The hostile undercurrent was cemented when Lord and Lady Yarmouth, who were living in the Bothy, modest lodgings on the family estate (which is worth about £85 million), were evicted in June 2019, on the day of their first wedding anniversary.

At the time, Lady Yarmouth was four months pregnant with Lord and Lady Hertford's first and, currently, only grandchild, Clement. He has never met his paternal grandparents, who only live a few miles up the road.

The couple decided that instead of

wallowing in self-pity and licking their wounds, they would turn their circumstances into a catalyst for a new life and business. They launched a drinks company called St Maur just before the first lockdown in March 2020.

"To understand what really spurred us on with St Maur, we should start with a comparison," says Lady Yarmouth. "Just over 30 years ago, Harry Seymour, William's father, married Bea, William's Brazilian mother. Less than a year later Harry's father, Hugh Seymour, the 8th Marquess of Hertford, gifted Harry, then Earl of Yarmouth, Ragley Hall, the family seat for more than 300 years, along with the thriving business he had built up on the estate to take forward."

By comparison, the only gift the current Earl of Yarmouth and his wife received one year after their wedding was an eviction notice.

"So we set about exploring business opportunities of our own and St Maur was the one that we got most passionate about. When we were happy we had developed a really great product, we brought it to market," she says. "Fortunately for us, Hugh Seymour had had a sense of accountability and had ensured some of the ancient, but by now neglected, woodland at Ragley could be passed through trust into the ownership of his grandson, William."

They found themselves stewards of 465 acres of woodland on historic family land, which was full of wild elder.

It was the beginning of the pandemic though and they were juggling a new business with looking after their baby.

"We've learnt the virtues of flexibility, agility, and tenacity in business from day one," says Lady Yarmouth, wryly.

The couple are involved at every stage in the making of St Maur, which was inspired by champagne cocktails they served on their wedding day.

"When we got married (at Ragley Hall) we thought it would be great fun to create a celebration drink for our friends, family, and guests. We wanted one of those things that when you smell and taste it, it evokes the memory of a special moment in time. That's why we went for a pink elderflower liqueur. It's



▲ The Earl and Countess of Yarmouth, William and Kelsey Seymour; top right, in their converted horsebox mobile bar

*The only anniversary gift the Earl of Yarmouth and his wife received was an eviction notice*

so evocative of hazy summer days," says Lady Yarmouth.

They hand-pick the wild elder blossoms at the start of the summer, when they are at their best and most fragrant. "In the very early morning, as the sun starts to rise and it begins to get light,"

Everything is currently being produced on their land, but they are hoping to move to larger premises and find a permanent home in the next year.

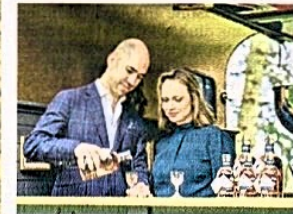
"As we came to market during the pandemic, we have concentrated mainly on growing our online sales

nationwide," says Lady Yarmouth. "We have an enthusiastic and loyal following locally, too, around the Heart of England, where we sell in farm shops, delis, and through independent wine merchants."

St Maur will, they hope, be the start of the legacy they leave to their children and signify a new chapter for the next generation. The name of their drink is a nod to the family's history, and dates back to the 13th century.

"We have ancestors who rode with William the Conqueror, but by the time Jane Seymour married Henry VIII and Katherine Parr married Thomas Seymour after Henry died, the family name had changed. The name 'St Maur' brings a historic connection to mark the regeneration of a family heritage," says Lady Yarmouth.

"As a couple, we realised it was time for us to step up, to take our own accountability for what it means to be a Seymour, and to decide what we want our legacy to be. St Maur is a step on that path. It marks the birth of a



*'The name brings a historic connection to mark the regeneration of a family heritage'*

brand, the start of a business, and the rebirth of a family story."

And what is next for the Hertford family?

"Harry and Bea show no desire to build bridges," says Lady Yarmouth, wistfully. "Perhaps the most poignant example would be the way they relate to Clement, their only grandchild."

"Just before last Christmas, Harry wrote to William to say that should we, or anyone associated with us, set foot on the estate, he would treat that as trespass and would use whatever legal means available to prevent us from doing so. He specifically included his one-year old grandson in that edict."

It is very difficult, says Lady Yarmouth, to know how to build anything from that. "We count our blessings, move on, and in doing so we take the responsibility for and ambition of a once proud family with us. We look forward to the future, and the next chapter with St Maur."

"When the family were approached about this story, Lady Hertford said: 'We ourselves prefer to deal with family matters in a private manner, so we again will not be making any further comment.'"