

Shameless

Britain's most amoral aristocrat?

'Outrageous' is hardly a strong enough adjective to describe the 7th Marquess of Bristol, a man who lived right on the edge and wasn't ashamed to do so. **Steven Russell** hears the most detailed account yet of a magnesium-bright life that burned out prematurely

JOHN Hervey was the Suffolk aristocrat who had it all and lost it. His is a story of fast living, dysfunctional behaviour, tenderness and arrogance. He was a man who sacrificed centuries of history and duty for the pursuit of personal pleasure and effectively allowed a dynasty to crumble. His is a tale of madcap helicopter rides under the influence of drink and drugs, 140mph blasts up the hard shoulder of the M11 in his Ferrari because he was irritated by heavy traffic, and treating the long, snaking approach to Ickworth House, near Bury St Edmunds, as a drag strip. The estate, during the late 20th Century an uneasy hybrid of National Trust property-cum-ancestral seat, had a 20mph speed limit. A friend of the late marquess remembers him powering the Ferrari up the drive at 100mph-plus - during the day, with National Trust visitors, dogs and children wandering about. Rules, it seemed, were for the little people. Another friend, the actor Rupert Everett, once wrote about Hervey doing 130mph through the Mont Blanc Tunnel connecting France with Italy.

"He was a brilliant driver, but took risks and got away with things that would have sent you and me to an early death," says Marcus Scriven, whose fascinating biographical studies of the 7th Marquess of Bristol and his father Victor form the heart of his new book *Splendour & Squalor: The Disgrace and Disintegration of Three Aristocratic Dynasties*.

While the awful behaviour obviously looms large, the journalist strives for a rounded view. He doesn't excuse the aristocrats' appalling conduct and decadence, but has sympathy for the way nature and nurture dealt them some difficult hands.

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The reprehensible actions are hard to ignore, though – even a decade on from John Hervey's death early in 1999, at the age of 44, having finally succumbed to the consequences of alcohol and chemical abuse and hard living. He's reckoned to have squandered about £7million on drugs, all told.

There's an episode when Lord Nicholas Hervey – who sadly would commit suicide by hanging himself in 1998 – arrives at Ickworth for dinner with his half-brother. Much of the estate had long been signed over to The National Trust, with the Hervey family leasing just a wing of the house.

In the early hours, writes Marcus, John announced he was going up in his helicopter, despite having put away two or three bottles of claret and a pint of port. The aircraft rose and its blinding spotlight sought out a section of the rotunda, the central dome-like building that's the iconic image of Ickworth.

This lit-up area was home to a National Trust employee, it emerged. Using a loudhailer, the marquess spat out a stream of vitriol.

It all seems so sad and unnecessary – and a waste of ability that perhaps could have been channelled into positive ends, rather than destructive directions, had things been different.

"Potentially, John had great talent," reckons Marcus Scriven, "and if he'd ever harnessed it, and existed in a corporate structure or been retained on some kind of arrangement, some kind of contract, he would have been a superb character, because he could be phenomenally charming and was a brilliant flier. To fly a helicopter is really difficult, and to fly a helicopter well is very rare. At the end, though, he was snorting cocaine off the route map and swigging Vodka Collins."

The book also recounts how John once threw a carving knife through a first-floor window during an undergraduate party in Cambridge. It's said to have lodged itself in a pram in a neighbouring garden – a pram in which a baby lay. Luckily, the tot was uninjured.

The scandalous tales are just so numerous. Fuelled by drugs, he'd load a shotgun and shoot into the sky while hurling insults at members of the public who'd paid to visit Ickworth. He'd shoot the door off the fridge, and demolish valuable furniture.

John Hervey was born in the autumn of 1954. Father Victor, explains Marcus, was the ex-Eaton-and-Sandhurst marquess known for taking potshots at guests from the upstairs windows at Ickworth. He'd sold arms during the Spanish Civil War, was known as Mayfair's Number One Playboy as a young man, and was also spoken of as the Pink Panther of his era: he'd been jailed for three years after a couple of jewellery robberies in Mayfair. Not your usual dad, then.

John would later describe his father as an emotionally cold man, "a demi-god", who terrified him and never did anything with his son. When he was four, his mother, Pauline, left for Newmarket horse trainer Teddy Lambton,

though John would visit her as a schoolboy and had a good relationship with her.

Marcus quotes a prep school contemporary of John's who remembers Victor promising to visit his son. Yet he would often fail to show – sending instead a car full of toys.

John left Harrow in 1972 and then, on his 21st birthday in 1975, received a life tenancy in 8,000 acres in East Anglia. He splashed out on a 125ft yacht. Over the next few years he added further grown-up toys, including a BMW motorbike and a speedboat.

And then there were the pleasures of the flesh – with a preference, it seems, for youngish males – and the London party circuit, where he rubbed shoulders with luminaries such as Mick Jagger.

Drink, too. John took his first steps towards alcoholism as a teenager, concealing bottles of creme de menthe in

the loo cisterns

at Ickworth

and graduat-

ing to vodka

and orange,

Cointreau

on the

rocks, and

vodka and

grapefruit

juice – plus

Bloody

Marys.

According

to a friend

quoted

by Marcus, the then Earl Jermyn had his first taste of cocaine in about 1973 or 1974. Heroin came later. The substances going into his system appeared to embolden a shy man: Ickworth became the stage for shooting parties for his well-heeled friends and somewhat racier occasions for those preferring . . . er . . . more recreational activities.

Life was never dull. John became a tax exile in Monaco, and lived in New York. In the early 1980s he was arrested there for alleged drug trafficking, though the accusations were dropped.

There was a twist when his engagement was announced in the spring of 1984 to a young – teetotal! – woman called Francesca Fisher. At 20, she was about a decade younger than her



“ John had quietened down considerably by the time he lost everything...
Marcus Scriven

fiancé. It seemed crazy, but friends, says Marcus, insisted he really did love her.

Ickworth hosted 400 guests for the great society occasion, including dancer

Wayne Sleep and singer Bryan Ferry. But it didn't end happily for the new bride. Marcus, who spoke to Francesca for his book, says she remembers searching for her husband of a few hours and finding him taking cocaine in an upstairs room with a bunch of his cronies. Other people told the author different versions

but it's clear that, whatever happened, it wasn't a wedding night to cherish.

It makes one wonder what she expected, though, what with his all-round reputation. Well, Marcus tells the EADT, he thinks it was probably a time of tumultuous and genuine emotions, mixed with a degree of awareness and perhaps a bit of self-deception.

"People who knew her then were adamant she loved him, and they're pretty certain he loved her – though that doesn't obviate these concerns. You're going into that marriage knowing it's chancy, to say the least. But Francesca comes from that very free-spirited background, so it was sort of 'let's go for it', in a way that most people wouldn't."

He says Francesca is an amazing person who has essentially moved on, and has a partner and a son. "She's a great survivor. In some ways she was exactly the right person for John because she was such a free spirit. In some ways she was completely wrong, because, as one of the guests at the wedding said, you could see she was completely vulnerable. She was gentle – is gentle – and could be hurt . . . and, as you have read, was hurt."

It's also astonishing to read that there had been talk and hopes of children – a possibility, had the marquess (he inherited the title in 1985 after the death of his father) managed to kick

drugs and remain clean. Friends reckoned parenthood could have been the making of him. But, one wonders, what kind of father would he have been?

"As a biographer, naturally one cannot theorise," chuckles Marcus, "though you can! It's indeed a fascinating speculative question."

In any case, the union came to an end within a couple of years, with friends of John paying tribute to Francesca for almost managing to transform his life. Marcus reports that one of her searches of the ancestral seat resulted in 3kg of cocaine being flushed into the sewerage system.

Unregulated, and away from Suffolk, he'd fall back into bad habits.

In the autumn of 1988 he went to prison for possessing and importing drugs, being released the following spring.

There was more trouble in 1993, when Bristol was sentenced to 10 months for possessing heroin and cocaine. It was virtually the last straw for The National Trust, which served notice to end the lease on his remaining part of Ickworth House. As well as the issues about drugs and the reckless driving in the grounds, the organisation was concerned about visitors being injured by his wolfhounds. The trust said the marquess had persistently breached the terms of the lease. The uneasy relationship rumbled on.

John sold 2,200 acres of the estate for £3million.

As well as continuing to abuse his body with drink and drugs, John was also seriously ill, having learned in the mid-1980s that he'd contracted HIV – something that was never publicly confirmed while he was alive. "To spare the family's feelings, I think."

In the summer of 1996 there was a big two-day sale at Ickworth, run by Sotheby's, at which "treasures" brought in £2.3million: silver, porcelain and paintings were auctioned, along with classic cars such as a 1964 Silver Cloud and a 1941 Cadillac. John said he planned to spend half the year in the Bahamas.

In the late 1990s he sold the remaining lease on the east wing – 64 years – to The National Trust for a sum reportedly just shy of £100,000, says Marcus. The marquess rented a farm at Denston and then moved to Little Horringer Hall, a farmhouse that until recently had been on his estate.

"John had quietened down considerably by the time he lost everything, and that was one of the ironies. He had lost his gun licence. I can't remember if he had his driving licence back, but he was a shadow of what he had been, and wasn't behaving



monstrously, or nearly as monstrously as he had; but so much damage had been done. And also, by then, he needed the money, so he accepted it.”

The end was near. John was found dead in bed on a January morning in 1999. Coroner Bill Walrond spoke of multiple organ failure and recorded a verdict of “dependence on drugs”.

The £5,000 John left, it emerged later, was easily swallowed up by the liabilities he also left, including the funeral expenses. The estate, then, in reality amounted to nothing. A fortune had gone.

“As (great friend) James Whitby would say, he sort of timed his own death,” says Marcus. “The money had run out. If he’d willed himself to live, I’m sure he could have lived a bit longer. But no – the show was over. He was a showman, and that’s really how he decided to live his life.”

The writer argues we can’t hope to understand John without understanding his father. Victor’s own father was 44 when he married – his sparky bride in her mid-to-late 20s – and young Victor probably didn’t get the attention he needed: “and the pattern is set”.

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‘HE BELIEVED HE BELONGED AT THE TOP OF THE HEAP’

A COUPLE arriving for a shooting weekend in the 1960s at Ickworth, the Herveys’ Suffolk family seat, noticed Victor leaning from an upper window. As they drove nearer, he opened fire (whether with a revolver, rifle or shotgun, his guests were uncertain. ‘We didn’t stay to find out. We practically had to run for cover’). A family friend recalls passing the Bag o’ Nails, a pub on the Buckingham Palace Road, in the company of Pauline and John, her son by Victor. ‘That,’ Pauline said to John, gesturing at the Bag o’ Nails, ‘is where your father emptied a revolver into the ceiling.’ It is possible that some of Victor’s other targets were not inanimate. He assured a friend, Moira Lister, that he had shot two men in a mutiny whilst treasure-hunting on Cocos Island, 360

miles off the coast of Costa Rica. According to one of John’s friends, the claim might have been uncharacteristically modest. ‘We found a packet of photographs,’ he remembers. ‘One of them showed Victor standing with his foot on four dead bodies.’

[It captured] a profounder truth: it showed Victor doing what mattered – striking the right pose, one which reassured him, during his lifelong shriek for attention, that he was where he believed he belonged, at the top of the heap.

■ Extract from *Splendour & Squalor: The Disgrace and Disintegration of Three Aristocratic Dynasties* by Marcus Scriven, published by Atlantic Books, £25

FATHER SEEMED ‘SO STIFF AND UNBENDING’

Henry Wodehouse senses that (contrary to the impressions formed by cousins who descended en masse on Ickworth), there was not too much to envy in John’s upbringing, so much of which seemed confined to the nursery. ‘Everything happened there. The television was there; all the meals were served there. He was completely abandoned, had nobody else to play with. We were the only people who were ever there . . .’

The nursery was recognizably the Ickworth of Frederick, the ‘Old Marquess’, ‘a dingy, very Edwardian environment’, in the words of a friend from adolescence. ‘One would have expected to find a nursery maid coming round the corner smelling of carbolic soap.’

It was, though, less the style or the fabric of the nursery that struck Selina Hastings during her summer at Ickworth in the mid 1960s than John’s relationship with his father. ‘The situa-

tion was extremely pathetic. The nursery was on the top floor: it was me and nanny with the new baby, Nicholas, and John. Victor was impossible... so stiff and unbending. He didn’t seem to talk to John at all.’ Catherine Rosedale agrees, characterising Victor as ‘very peculiar, really cold to John’, whom, as far as she could tell, he steadfastly ignored. In these circumstances, the nursery became both cell and sanctuary, as Maria Rawlinson remembers. ‘Even when he was older, the one thing he used to do was to go upstairs to where the old nursery had been. He was devoted to [it] in one way, but I think it conjured up all sorts of... I feel like crying, thinking about it.’

■ Extract from *Splendour & Squalor: The Disgrace and Disintegration of Three Aristocratic Dynasties* by Marcus Scriven, published by Atlantic Books, £25



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“So you do feel some sympathy for John, who had this cold and actively distant father. But wherever we are, the only way we’re going to make progress is if we take responsibility for our own actions. John ultimately knew that, so John is ultimately responsible for what happened to himself – but I have huge sympathy for him.

“He behaved appallingly very often; but, let’s face it, if you or I had been in that position, how much better would we have done? I don’t like to think about it too much.

“It just makes you appreciate structure, discipline, love, ‘normality’. Those are the precious things: not the massive acreage, the extraordinary house, the park and the family silver and the paintings. They’re all great fun, but – and I’m afraid it’s a desperately bourgeois message – it’s better to have the love and the family structure.”

One of the marquess’s friends said he’d grown

up without boundaries. “So you just keep pushing – and you’re screaming for attention. He imbibed that from his father: you’ve got to make a statement. No steady, incremental progress – that’s dull. You show you’re more brilliant than everyone else. You rip people off slightly; you steal a march on people – because it doesn’t matter. It’s a bit of a joke.”

Marcus also has some compassion for Victor, though less than for his son, bearing in mind how he was raised. “Again, he could – could – have chosen to do things differently. These guys made choices; ultimately they’re responsible.”

■ **Splendour & Squalor: The Decline And Fall Of Three Aristocratic Dynasties** is published by Atlantic Books at £25.



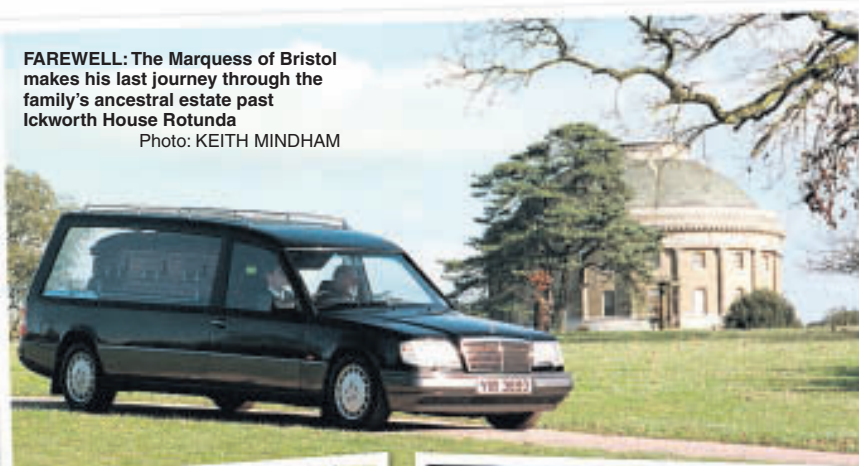
SHAMELESS: The late Marquess Lord Bristol at Ickworth taken in 1996

Photo: ANDY ABBOTT



FAREWELL: The Marquess of Bristol makes his last journey through the family's ancestral estate past Ickworth House Rotunda

Photo: KEITH MINDHAM



Above left, **Troubled peer the Marquess of Bristol appeared at St Edmundsbury magistrate's court on drugs charges arising from a police raid on his Suffolk home. The hearing had twice been postponed while the millionaire marquess attended a detoxification programme.** Above right, **Earl Jermyn (later Marquess of Bristol) marrying Francesca Fisher in September 1984.** left, **Victor, the 6th Marquess of Bristol, who died in Monte Carlo in March 1985**





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**BOOK: Author Marcus
Scriver outside
Ickworth House in
Horringer**

Photo: TUDOR
MORGAN-OWEN





**SUAVE: The late
Marquess of Bristol at
Ickworth taken in 1996**
Photo: ANDY ABBOTT

