Wives & Daughters

Introduction, Bridget and Elizabeth

This exhibition looks at some of the intriguing stories from Holkham’s history from the 16th century through to the women associated with Holkham today.

Bridget Paston

We begin in 1583 with the marriage of Bridget Paston to the founder of the family fortune, Sir Edward Coke, Attorney-General to Elizabeth I. Having grown up nearby, Sir Edward knew Bridget’s family and asked for her hand as soon as she turned eighteen. At the time he was a thirty-one year old barrister with a successful practice. Bridget’s father had no qualms about accepting his offer and his daughter brought a handsome dowry to the marriage. Bridget kept their house at Holborn close to the Temple where Sir Edward went about his business at law. Her diary shows that she ran the household, but she was also an independent woman, often travelling without her husband. They had ten children, eight of whom survived.

Bridget died in 1598 and is buried in nearby Tittleshall church. Sir Edward’s admiration for her is displayed on her memorial: ‘Many daughters have done virtuously but thou surpassest them all.’

Elizabeth Hatton

Elizabeth Hatton was the rich, well-connected and beautiful widow of Sir William Hatton. Elizabeth was unsuccessfully wooed by Sir Edward Coke’s great rival, Francis Bacon, but she married Sir Edward in 1598, only four months after the death of his first wife. The wedding was secretly held in a private house, despite being against church law. Sir Edward Coke and his wife were threatened with prosecution and imprisonment by the ecclesiastical courts, however he pleaded ignorance of church law and they were forgiven.

Elizabeth was twenty-six years younger than her husband and owned an extensive and valuable collection of books and manuscripts. She was described as frivolous and self-willed; her public disagreements with her husband and her refusal to take the name of Coke, preferring to remain known as Lady Hatton, earned her a reputation as a troublesome woman. Sir Edward and Elizabeth had a daughter, Frances, who was forced by her father to marry Sir John Villiers, later 1st Viscount Purbeck.

Sir Edward and Elizabeth’s marriage ended in separation. Elizabeth died in 1646 and she was buried in the crypt at St. Andrew Guild Church in Holborn.
The accounts show that the wedding of Thomas Coke, later 1st Earl of Leicester, to Lady Margaret Tufton, 18 year-old daughter of the 1st Earl of Thanet, was a lavish affair with more than £3,000 spent on presents for her alone. Even as the young couple took their place in London society, Thomas Coke was planning the building of a vast Palladian mansion on the north Norfolk coast. He began the building of Holkham Hall but died before it could be completed. It fell to Lady Margaret to finish the construction and furnish the house and her meticulous accounts of acquisitions of fabrics and furnishings tell us much about Holkham's early history. Lady Margaret was an educated woman, able to read French, Latin and Greek, and who gave generously to the poor of the district.

Mary Campbell, wife of the 1st Earl's son from a portrait by Reynolds.

Mary Campbell

Edward Coke, only son of the 1st Earl and Lady Margaret Tufton, married Mary Campbell, the youngest daughter of the 2nd Duke of Argyll.

Her fair complexion and temperamental nature earned her the nickname of 'The White Cat'. The marriage was deeply unhappy; Mary declined to sleep with her husband and in retaliation he kept her a virtual prisoner at Holkham. After much legal wrangling, the couple separated, but Mary remained married to Edward until his death in 1753, which left her a widow at the age of twenty-six. Mary then seems to have become delusional and claimed to be secretly married to the Prince of Wales. There is no proof of this, but she once made the claim in his presence and he declined to deny it.

Anne Coke

The 1st Earl's younger sister Anne Coke eloped at the age of sixteen with Philip Roberts, the son of a London neighbour. When news of their marriage reached her brother on his Grand Tour he disowned her. As the 1st Earl's son Edward died before his parents and childless, it was Anne's grandson, Thomas William Coke, the famous 'Coke of Norfolk', who inherited Holkham in 1776.
Jane Dutton

Jane Dutton was twenty-two when her twenty-one year old husband, Thomas William Coke, inherited Holkham. They had been at Holkham less than ten months when their first child, a son, was stillborn after Jane was frightened by a mouse that climbed into her nightcap and hair. Although the couple went on to have three more children over the next twenty years, all were daughters and no son was born to inherit Holkham.

The accounts show that Jane was kind and generous. She made donations to the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, as well as to the local poorhouse, the almshouses at Holkham and gave many small gifts to people in the district. The servants always had Christmas boxes and were treated to the theatre each year.

Jane was clever and well read and often accompanied her husband on political visits to London, enjoying a rich social life while in the capital. Her daughters were taught to draw by Gainsborough and the youngest, Elizabeth, showed considerable talent as an artist.

Jane died unexpectedly while on a visit to Bath in 1800, when she was only forty-six years old.

Anne Keppel

Coke of Norfolk had been a widower for over twenty years when he married his eighteen-year-old goddaughter, a girl fifty years his junior. Anne Keppel was the daughter of his great friend, Lord Albemarle. Both he and Lord Albemarle had hoped that Anne might marry Coke’s nephew and heir apparent, William, but the two young people refused to entertain the idea. It was only when her father’s remarriage threatened to put an end to her visits to Holkham, that Anne confessed her attachment to her godfather, and they were married. Coke of Norfolk’s political enemies mocked the alliance and many of his friends thought it folly, but it was a happy marriage and soon produced the longed-for son and heir.

Anne seems to have adjusted easily to her new role and, in spite of producing five additions to the Coke family in ten years, she maintained an active social life. She persuaded her husband to modernise his appearance by cutting off his pigtail and giving up his wig, but she could not stop him powdering his hair, nor give up wearing knee breeches.

Coke of Norfolk died in 1842. A year later Anne married Edward Ellice, MP for Coventry, only to die in childbirth at the age of forty-one.
From Miss Jane Digby to Lady Ellenborough

The vivacious and beautiful Jane Digby was born on April 3rd 1807. She was a favourite granddaughter of the celebrated Coke of Norfolk. Jane's father, Admiral Digby was one of Nelson's admirals and away a good deal, so Jane and her two brothers spent much of their childhood at Holkham with their mother, Thomas Coke's daughter, Lady Andover. At seventeen, Jane married the much older Lord Ellenborough (later Viceroy of India) but within four years Jane had run off to Paris with a young Austrian prince, by whom she was pregnant. This caused one of the most scandalous divorce cases of the 19th century and alienated Jane forever from most of her family. After the prince deserted her, she remained on the continent and became the confidante of King Ludwig I of Bavaria, until she married a Bavarian baron who adored her. Next Jane fell in love with a Greek count who fought a roadside duel with her husband as the errant couple eloped after a New Year's Eve ball. She later married the count but after their beloved son fell to his death at her feet, the marriage ended and Jane became an inveterate traveller in the East.  

Wife to the Sheikh – Jane Digby el Mezrab

At the age of 48, disillusioned by men, Jane set out on a painting trip to Syria. The young nobleman, Sheikh Medjuel el Mezrab, who was hired to act as her guide, impressed her by risking his own life to save hers, when their camp was raided by bandits and before long the two were deeply in love. After many vicissitudes the couple married and Medjuel – Jane's 4th husband – was unquestionably the love of her life. Until her death in 1881 she spent six months each year in her luxurious villa in Damascus, but for the remainder of the year she lived the life of a wandering nomad in the famous black goat hair tents of the Bedouin. A brilliant rider, she often rode into battle at Medjuel's side in inter-tribal rivalry. She not only learned to speak and write fluent Arabic but also the patois of the Bedouin and eventually she became the matriarch of her tribe, representing the Mezrabi women in disputes and acting as envoy for the tribe in diplomatic negotiations with the Sublime Porte. She died in Damascus, where her grave can be visited today. She is still remembered by her tribe and the diaries she kept all her life (which were returned to the Digby family after her death) record her remarkable story as the wife of a desert sheikh.

Our thanks to Mary S. Lovell, author of A Scandalous Life, The Biography of Jane Digby.
Juliana Whitbread

Juliana Whitbread was just seventeen when she married the twenty year old 2nd Earl in 1843. The newly-weds turned their backs on the sophisticated demands of London society opting instead for the purer pleasures of Holkham, where they could often be found driving around the park in a pony carriage. Their happiness was interrupted only a few weeks after the wedding, when rumours swept London that Juliana had returned to her mother because the Earl had been paying attentions to a maid. In truth he had only given the maid a lift in his carriage, on the way to church one Sunday, to save her walking as she had sprained her ankle. Although the couple ignored the gossip, it was very slow to die down.

Juliana had seven girls and two boys in eleven years. Two more sons both died as infants and she died young at the age of forty-four in 1870.

Georgiana Cavendish

The 2nd Earl re-married in 1875. The beautiful Georgiana Cavendish was twenty-three years old and the eldest daughter of Baron Chesham. She had been warned ‘not to marry Leicester’ as she would be ‘forever pregnant’! Indeed over the next thirteen years she had six children, five boys and a girl, but one boy died. In 1893 Georgiana gave birth to yet another child, a son, when her husband was seventy-one years old. On the death of the 2nd Earl, Georgiana moved to Weasenham Hall nearby, a house that had been especially built for her. She took her loyal footman, Gregory, from Holkham and he remained in her service when she later moved to London, where she died aged eighty-five.

Alice White

The 3rd Earl married Alice White in 1879. Alice was a personal friend of Queen Alexandra and Queen Mary and entertained lavishly at Holkham, but she never tired of helping people less fortunate than herself and was loved by Holkham’s villagers and tenants.

At the outbreak of World War I, Alice threw herself wholeheartedly into the work of the Red Cross and was made president of the Norfolk branch. She helped to run a soldiers’ convalescent hospital at Model Farm on the estate, driving an ambulance. She helped ex-servicemen in the county secure pensions, which until her intervention had been denied them.

Alice was a great lover of the arts. It is believed that her friend, the famous ballet dancer Anton Dolin, once brought the great Russian choreographer Nijinska to Holkham and they danced here.

Alice herself was something of a dancer and was renowned in her family for her love of dancing the foxtrot and the charleston to music provided by members of the family on piano, banjo and drums.

Wives & Daughters

The Victorians

Georgiana with Reginald, affectionally known as ‘Dumps’.

Wife of the 3rd Earl

Juliana with her eldest child, Julia, born 1844.

1st wife of the 2nd Earl

Georgiana Cavendish as a child. Known in the family as ‘Georgie’.

2nd wife of the 2nd Earl

Alice was made Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE) for her work in World War I.

Red Cross award recognising the work Alice did during World War I.

Alice with her children: Tom, Arthur, Roger, Marjory and Bridget in about 1896.

Alice was made Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE) for her work in World War I.
Elizabeth Yorke
Lady Elizabeth Yorke, only daughter of the 8th Earl of Hardwicke, married the 5th Earl in 1931. She worked for the Red Cross in Cairo, Egypt during World War II and on returning to England drove an ambulance for the duration of the war. She was also in charge of land girls in north Norfolk. She founded Holkham Pottery in 1951 which at its height employed nearly 100 people, including Lady Anne and Lady Carey, and was the largest light industry in North Norfolk. The Countess was a Lady in Waiting to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II at her coronation in 1953. She held the office of Lady of the Bedchamber to the Queen from 1953 to 1970. In 1955 she married Colin Tennant and became Lady Glenconner. She was Lady in Waiting to Princess Margaret from 1971 until 2002 when the Princess died. Princess Margaret was a personal friend and godmother to May Tennant, one of Lady Glenconner’s five children. She has been President of the Stars Organisation for Spastics and the National Association for Maternal and Child Welfare. In 2010 she was made an Ambassador to St Lucia to represent the country at the IMO (International Maritime Association).

Lady Carey
Lady Carey Coke’s marriage to Captain Bryan Basset at St Withburga’s, Holkham in April 1960, was the ‘wedding of the year’. The bridegroom’s mother was Lady of the Bedchamber to Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother for 30 years and Her Majesty was one of the witnesses to the marriage. A parish councillor for more than 30 years, Lady Carey has also been President of the Women’s Section of the RNLI, Wells-next-the-Sea and President of the local branch of the NSPCC.

Lady Anne
In her youth, Lady Anne Coke worked for Holkham Pottery, travelling around Britain and the USA selling its products. Her photograph appeared on the front cover of The Tatler when she was declared ‘Debutante of the Year’ in 1952. Lady Anne was a train bearer to Her Majesty The Queen at her coronation. In 1955 she married Colin Tennant and became Lady Glenconner. She was Lady in Waiting to Princess Margaret from 1971 until 2002 when the Princess died. Princess Margaret was a personal friend and godmother to May Tennant, one of Lady Glenconner’s five children. She has been President of the Stars Organisation for Spastics and the National Association for Maternal and Child Welfare. In 2010 she was made an Ambassador to St Lucia to represent the country at the IMO (International Maritime Association).

Lady Sarah
Born in 1944, Lady Sarah Coke is the third and youngest daughter of the 5th Earl. She also worked at the Pottery and for several years worked at the boy’s orphanage, Berry Hall, at Walsingham. She married Major David Walter in 1970. They have two sons, Nicholas and James, and live in Perthshire, Scotland.
It was while working as a personal assistant in an agricultural company that Valeria Potter met her future husband, Edward Coke, who had been seconded from the company’s South African subsidiary. Her secretarial career took her to Canada and South Africa, returning to England to marry Edward in April 1962. She continued to work after her marriage, becoming PA to the Controller of Advertising at Associated Rediffusion Television in 1963.

Cultural studies and lecturing

Valeria, Viscountess Coke studied History of Art in Florence and lived there for a time. She studied the architecture of Palladio under Howard Burns in Vicenza, Italy and completed a V & A Study Centre course in the Decorative Arts. In 1992 she became a senior guide at the Victoria and Albert Museum, specialising in Islam, India, China, and the British Galleries. Her travels have taken her to many countries, such as Ethiopia and Armenia, exploring the roots of Christianity. She has devised and led tours to the German state of Thuringia, exploring the early life of Prince Albert. As a freelance lecturer, she has given lectures to numerous learned societies both here and in the U.S.A.

Charity work and fundraising

Valeria, Viscountess Coke is President of the League of Friends of the King’s Lynn Hospitals and Patron of the local branch of the Talking Times, a talking newspaper for the partially sighted. She is a committee member of the Anglo-American Georgian Group, a national charity for the preservation of our Georgian heritage.

The pilgrim road to Rome

Valeria walked the pilgrim route from Bordeaux to Rome, completing the journey in several stages between 2002 and 2005. She entered Rome on Good Friday to be present for Pope John Paul’s last blessing in St Peter’s Square on Easter Day 2005.

In 2009 Valeria, Viscountess Coke was awarded a Pro Memoria medal by the Polish Government for her help with fundraising for the statue of General Sikorski in Portland Place, London. This medal is awarded for outstanding contribution in perpetuating the memory of the people and deeds in the struggle for Polish independence in WWII and after.

Pictured from left to right: Lady Laura Paul, the Hon. Rupert Coke, Valeria, Viscountess Coke and the late Polish minister Janusz Krakowski.

Left: The Pro Memoria medal.
The Countess of Leicester

The Countess of Leicester was born on the Isle of Wight, but spent part of her early childhood in Nigeria, as her father was in the Colonial Service. She was just four when she was sent back to boarding school in England and lived with a nanny. The Countess worked in fashion and the theatrical world and was secretary to the author and playwright, Peter Luke, and worked on his plays, including Hadrian VII. In 1972 she married Colin de Chair and they had two children, Sabina and Hugo, who came to live at Holkham when she married the Earl of Leicester in 1986.

Bringing new vitality to Holkham

Before the 7th Earl’s retirement in 2006, the Countess played an active role in helping her husband run Holkham and its various businesses; buying for the gift shops and running the tearooms, often working in these herself. She also helped with the restoration of the state rooms, working closely with a silk weaver, gilders, a carpet weaver, picture restorers and the art historian, John Cornforth. The Countess remarks, “I never took any decision before asking him – the house is too important and fabrics too expensive, to make mistakes.”

Supporting culture and good causes

In 1987 the Countess started the classical music concerts in the Marble Hall and a few years later she invited an opera company, Diva Opera, to perform two operas every summer. The great success of these events is no doubt due to the many acclaimed musicians that the Countess has persuaded to perform at Holkham. The operas are in aid of charity, generally the Norfolk Churches Trust, the Countess’s favourite charity, of which she is a trustee.

The local community

The Countess takes a keen interest in the local community and is patron of the Granary Theatre in Wells, as well as being patron of Burnham Market Playgroup and a supporter of Wells RNLI.

The Countess named the new Wells and Walsingham Light Railway engine Norfolk Heroine in 2010, in remembrance of nurse Edith Cavell.
Daughter of the society dressmaker Belinda Bellville and financier David Whately, Polly Whately grew up in Dorset, the youngest of three children.

Belinda Bellville
Belinda Bellville started up her dressmaking business Belville et Cie in 1953. Bellinda soon became the society dressmaker to debutantes and duchesses, later forming the company Bellville Sassoon with David Sassoon. Among others, she dressed Princess Margaret, the Duchess of Kent and Candice Bergen, and also designed dresses for Audrey Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor, Vanessa Redgrave and Lauren Bacall.

After university in Edinburgh, where she gained an MA in Spanish and French, Polly worked in London in fashion PR, then with her cousin, Cath Kidston, helping to set up Cath’s successful fabrics and clothing design business.

Polly met Viscount Coke in 1994 and they were married two years later. They moved into the hall in 2007 and began making alterations to suit the house to the needs of a young family. Pictured here in Switzerland with their children: Hermione Belinda born 1998 Juno Carey born 2000 Edward Horatio born 2003 Elizabeth Valeria born 2006

Viscountess Coke
Viscountess Coke takes an enthusiastic role in hosting charity events at Holkham. She has played a pivotal role in the development of the new retail range of exclusive Norfolk products for our gift shops at Holkham, supporting local businesses. Viscountess Coke is patron of EACH – East Anglia’s Children’s Hospices and president of the women’s section of the Wells-next-the-Sea branch of the British Legion.

Afters supporting charities and local businesses, Viscountess Coke and her sisters, Victoria and Sophie, wearing wedding hats which Polly made for them. Polly also made the hats for her mother, sisters and Lady Laura Paul for her own wedding.

Viscountess Coke studied millinery at London College of Fashion and was an apprentice with Lucy Hodges at Herald and Heart Hatters, famed for their work in film, theatre and TV, with projects ranging from Poirot to Bertolucci’s The Sheltering Sky and of course Four Weddings and a Funeral, which bolstered Herald & Heart’s profile around the world.

Now that her children are growing up Viscountess Coke has restarted her millinery business and has a studio in the south-west tower of the hall. She has received commissions for hats for the royal wedding of HRH Prince William and Kate Middleton.

The family enjoys camping and caravan holidays and Viscount Coke is President of the Caravan Club. Right: Viscountess Coke receives a basket of flowers at the annual Caravan Club rally which was held at Holkham in 2008.

Left: As a 40th birthday present, Viscountess Coke bought her husband an original 1965 American Airstream, which, when not in use by the family, is on display in the Bygones Museum.
The Wedding
Lady Anne Coke, eldest daughter of the 5th Earl, married Colin Tennant, 3rd Baron Glenconner, in St Withburga’s church, at Holkham, on the 21st April 1956. The whole of Holkham village was invited as well as 700 other guests. A special train brought 200 guests from London to Hunstanton. One party arrived from Belgium in an aircraft that landed in the park, while workers from the groom’s Scottish estate had to set off by motor coach the day before. The main reception was held in the state rooms of Holkham Hall, while villagers and estate workers held their reception in a marquee in the grounds, but the same sandwiches and champagne were served to all and each reception had its own wedding cake.

Bridesmaids and Pages
The bridesmaids wore white organdie dresses with tucked skirts, turquoise velvet sashes and turquoise and white head wreaths.

The pages wore white satin trousers with turquoise cummerbunds and organdie shirts. The dresses and suits were designed by Lady Carey Coke, the bride’s sister.

Royal Guests
Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother and Princess Margaret flew into local air base RAF Marham.

And the bride wore...
Lady Anne’s dress was made by royal dress designer, Norman Hartnell, from white silk organza with silver thread embroidered lace. The dress has the characteristic Hartnell scalloped neckline and hem with alternate hook and snappers on the lace work, which he frequently used in his couture. Following tradition, Lady Anne wore the family diamond tiara.
Lady Laura Coke, daughter of the 7th Earl, was educated at St Mary’s Calne in Wiltshire. She lived in Paris for three years working for the French fashion house Lanvin and became bilingual. On returning to London, Lady Laura joined the international department of property agents Knight Frank and Rutley.

Jonathan Paul was brought up in Devon and gained a degree in Land Management at Reading University. Jonathan has worked in London in the commercial property sector.

The Bride & Groom

The Wedding

Lady Laura Coke and Jonathan Paul were married in October 1993 at St Withburga’s church, Holkham. A reception for 250 guests was held in Holkham Hall.

The wedding cake was made locally and was decorated with the Greek key pattern from the Marble Hall. The top three of its six layers were made from polystyrene covered with marzipan, otherwise it might have collapsed under its own weight!

After the service the couple drove back to Holkham Hall in the 1909 Wolseley-Siddeley, now on display in the Bygones Museum.

The horse-drawn carriage

The bride and groom left in an 18th century horse-drawn carriage, which hadn’t been used for 150 years. The carriage is one of two kept in the Bygones Museum.

The bride’s wedding dress

Lady Laura’s dress was made by the London designer Azar in cream silk crepe, sourced from Paris. The neckline and sleeve edges were trimmed with a beaded pattern by embroiderers Hand & Lock to reflect the design of the family diamond tiara she wore.

Lady Laura carried a bouquet of arum lilies and bear grass, just as her grandmother had at her wedding.
The Wedding
Viscount Coke and Polly Whately were married on 21st December 1996 at the church of St Mary The Virgin, Gillingham, Dorset.

The bride was driven to the church in the Holkham Mulliner-coachwork Bentley.

The Honeymoon
After spending their wedding night at Cliveden House in Berkshire, Viscount and Viscountess Coke honeymooned in Tanzania and Zanzibar.

Viscountess Coke's wedding dress was designed by her mother, the society dressmaker Belinda Bellville.

The bride wore...
Viscountess Coke's wedding dress was designed by her mother, the society dressmaker Belinda Bellville. The dress is made of silk satin with a plain train. The bolero jacket worn for the ceremony is trimmed with ostrich feathers around the neck and cuffs. This was replaced in the evening with a bolero hand-embroidered in India with crystals. Following tradition, Viscountess Coke wore the Coke family Victorian white diamond tiara, made in the time of the 2nd Earl of Leicester.

The Wedding Party
The bridesmaids and pages wore outfits made from pale blue moiré with cream parachute silk underneath and were designed by the bride’s mother, Belinda Bellville.

Standing left to right: Jonathan Paul, the Earl of Leicester, Viscount Coke, Viscountess Coke, Lady Laura Paul, David Whately (bride’s father), Robbie Buxton (best man).

Seated left to right: Valeria Viscountess Coke, Mrs Leonard Potter (bridegroom’s grandmother), Mrs David Whately (bride’s mother), Mrs Thomas Lowther (bride’s sister), Mrs Jonathan Coltman-Rogers (bride’s sister), Mrs Audrey Pleydell-Bouverie (bride’s grandmother).

Bridesmaids: Molly Miller-Mundy, Iona Stewart-Richardson, Emma Finlayson and Hester Coltman-Rogers (baby).

Pages: Archie Philpotts, Archie Bellville, Guy Coltman-Rogers.