



Life in a cold climate

The lives of the extraordinary Mitford sisters were forged by the Cotswolds of their youth. Flora Watkins makes a literary pilgrimage

IN her old bedroom at Asthall Manor in west Oxfordshire (COUNTRY LIFE, September 23, 2009), over the barn that 'Farve' converted to a library for his older children, Nancy Mitford is reading aloud from *The Pursuit of Love* to an enraptured audience.

It's all part of a performance by a theatre company. The play—which sold out weeks ago—sees actresses bring the six daughters of Lord and Lady Redesdale to life, through excerpts from their letters, books and Nancy's novels.

'Are you a fan, too?' one man whispers as we file down to the ballroom, where 'Diana' is holding court. 'I adore them,' he confides. 'I've read just about everything they've written.'

‘Whenever I read “Peer’s Daughter” in a headline, I know it’s about one of you’

Dreamy Asthall was described by Debo, the last of the Mitford sisters, as 'a typical Cotswold manor, hard by the church, with a garden that descends to the River Windrush... in an exceptionally beautiful part of England' in her memoir, *Wait For Me!* (2010). Asthall and Swinbrook House, to which Lord Redesdale moved the family in 1926, were formative in the lives of all six sisters.

Nancy moved to Paris after the Second World War and fashioned acclaimed novels and historical biographies as stylish and sharply tailored as her Dior New Look suits. ➤

Freezing, but 'exceptionally beautiful': the Cotswolds defined the Mitfords' childhoods



Facing page: Four of the sisters (clockwise from top): Unity, Jessica, Diana and Nancy. Above: Asthall Manor, immortalised as Alconleigh

The Mitford name was, however, first made famous—nay, infamous—by her younger sisters. ‘Whenever I read the words “Peer’s Daughter” in a headline, I know it’s going to be... about one of you children,’ sighed ‘Muv’.

Aged 19, Decca (Jessica) eloped sensationally with Churchill’s radical Socialist nephew, Esmond Romilly, and later forged a successful career as a left-wing journalist and civil-rights campaigner in the USA. Diana’s second marriage, to the British Fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley, took place in the home of Joseph Goebbels, with Hitler in attendance. Unity also became friends with Hitler and attempted suicide at the outbreak of war. (Their brother Tom—the heir—was killed fighting in Burma in 1945.)

It was Debo, who became the Duchess of Devonshire, and Pamela, described as ‘most rural of them all’ in Sir John Betjeman’s poem *The Mitford Girls*, who were the great countrywomen among the sisters. However, Nancy’s two masterpieces, the highly autobiographical *The Pursuit of Love* and *Love in a Cold Climate*, are set in her childhood home among the ‘beautiful bleak Cotswold uplands’ described by Fanny in the opening pages of *Pursuit*.

That landscape is ‘very present and very important’, thinks Charlotte Mosley, Diana’s daughter-in-law and editor of Nancy’s essays and letters and the gargantuan *Letters*

Between Six Sisters (2007). ‘The love of the country was deeply rooted in Nancy as well,’ continues Mrs Mosley. ‘The very last thing she said when she was dying was “I’d give anything for one more day’s hunting”.’

‘The Hons’ linen cupboard, the Bolter and Uncle Matthew have passed into folklore’

Batsford Park, the Mitfords’ ancestral Cotswolds home, which was sold by Lord Redesdale to pay death duties in 1919, appears as the ‘Gothic French castle’, Hampton, in *Love in a Cold Climate*. Nancy’s love of Asthall is evident in Alconleigh, the Radletts’ home in *Pursuit*, although its setting, ‘stuck high upon the hillside’, is that of Swinbrook, which Farve built and was christened ‘Swine-brook’ by Nancy and loathed by most of the children.

Only Debo, with her hens and hunting with the Heythrop, was really happy there. Nancy recalled being bored and frustrated, as did Decca, who couldn’t wait to get away. ‘Freezing winter gave way to frosty spring... but nothing ever, ever happened,’ she lamented in her memoir, *Hons and Rebels* (1960).

That perpetual cold saw the sisters take refuge in the only warm place in the house, the Hons’ linen cupboard, one of the great comedic conceits of *Pursuit*. Together with the Bolter and Uncle Matthew—very much Farve, with his bloodhounds, child hunts and irascible temper: ‘in precisely six-and-three-quarter minutes, the damned fella will be late’—it has passed into folklore.

With her ‘light, yet profound’ novels, it was Nancy who did most to fashion the ‘Mitford myth’, thinks Laura Thompson, author of a witty biography, *Life in a Cold Climate* (2004). ‘Some of Lady Montdore’s lines are among the funniest in literature,’ she believes, citing: ‘Love indeed—whoever invented love ought to be shot.’

For the Mitford fans enjoying the play at Asthall, getting a glimpse inside the house is the ultimate experience. A few rooms are open during the biennial sculpture exhibition ‘On Form’ (COUNTRY LIFE, June 6, 2018), Rosie Pearson, Asthall’s chatelaine since 1997, tells me later. Apart from this handful of events, the house is private, ‘because,’ she stresses, ‘it is a home’.

Miss Pearson takes me on an unofficial Mitford tour, taking in the Hons’ linen cupboard on the top floor and a mural Nancy painted in her bedroom when she was at the Slade. ‘I haven’t changed the rooms at all, except the kitchen,’ she divulges. ‘There was ➤

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Happy with her hounds, Debo loved the countryside, as did equally hunting-mad Pamela

about 20 miles away from what Diana Alexander, her biographer and former daily woman, calls 'Mitford Land'.

'Debo used to come and stay [with Pam] a lot,' recalls Mrs Alexander. 'Diana, too. I think they reverted to how they'd been when they were girls.'

For Mitford devotees, the trail begins at Batsford Park, near Moreton-in-Marsh, which actually stood in for Alconleigh in the 2001 BBC TV series, starring a young Rosamund Pike as Fanny. Heythrop secretary Guy Avis recalls taking hounds there to film the hunting scenes. The area is much changed from the Mitfords' day, he feels, with the success of Lady Bamford's Daylesford at Kingham and Soho Farmhouse, at Great Tew, attracting a different crowd.

‘One thing baffles Mitford Land: why hasn't there been a feature film about the sisters?’

a green-baize wall here and there was the most amazing thing: a telephone room. I love to think of Nancy sitting here when Evelyn Waugh rang her up from Oxford.'

Walk half a mile from Asthall along the Windrush, the riverbanks lined with stumpy willows, and you come to Swinbrook. This Cotswold village, with its cottages of warm-hued stone, is home to The Swan Inn, Debo's pub, now part of the Chatsworth estate. Archie Orr-Ewing, who now has the lease, reinvigorated the pub for Debo 'in her later years, after she became the Dowager and was no longer focused on Chatsworth'.

Before her marriage to Andrew Cavendish, in 1941, Debo lived with Lady Redesdale and Unity at The Mill Cottage next door, after a further decline in the Mitford family fortunes meant yet another move.

Over an excellent lunch of lambs' kidneys, of which Farve/Uncle Matthew would have

approved—'Brains for breakfast,' Farve would bellow at Nancy's sophisticated house guests—Mr Orr-Ewing describes Debo's love for the area.

'I think a lot of it was about reviving her childhood, coming back home and keeping the Mitford legend alive,' he reveals. Black-and-white Mitford photographs adorn the walls and the famous William Acton portraits of the sisters hang over the chimneypiece (this, of course, being the 'U' term, as set out by Nancy in that mischievous essay). Debo was a frequent visitor, staying in 'Debo's Room'—the best room, explains Mr Orr-Ewing.

In Julian Jebb's 1980 documentary, *A Portrait of Nancy Mitford by her Sisters*, Pam stood on the riverbank nearby, a twinkle in her eye, reciting the 'Chubb Fuddler' passage from *Cold Climate*. After years living in Ireland and Switzerland, Pam was at her happiest living at Caudle Green,

'Everything's got sort of slicker,' agrees Mr Orr-Ewing. 'Now, every village has a gastro-pub, which is good for us, but perhaps the rural tranquillity has taken a hit.'

The sisters continue to mean brisk business—The Swan recently welcomed a coachload of American tourists in period dress on a Mitford-*Downton Abbey* tour. With the success of Jessica Fellowes's 'The Mitford Murders' series of period crime novels and a modern take on *Pursuit* by India Knight due out in late 2019, interest is only set to increase. Another biography of Nancy, seen through French eyes, called *La Dame de la rue Monsieur*, is also imminent.

There's only one thing that baffles the custodians of Mitford Land: why hasn't there yet been a feature film about the sisters? 'It would be the most incredible story,' says Mr Orr-Ewing, 'because there's nothing like them—is there?' 🐾

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In the footsteps of the Mitfords

○ Batsford Park, the seat of Lord Dulverton, isn't open to the public, but Batsford Arboretum, started by the sisters' grandfather, the 1st Baron Redesdale, is (01386 701441; www.batsarb.co.uk)

○ Asthall Manor's next 'On Form' sculpture exhibition will be in 2020 (01993 824319; www.onformsculpture.co.uk). Yoga classes and writing retreats are sometimes held there. At other times, the house is visible from the churchyard

○ Swinbrook House is privately owned, but can be glimpsed from the road to Shipton-under-Wychwood

○ The Swan Inn (left, 01993 823339; www.theswanswinbrook.co.uk). B&B is available in its old stables and nearby, in Riverside Cottage, once owned by Pam

○ Nancy is buried in Swinbrook churchyard, next to Unity and Diana, with Pam's grave close by. A mole (the Mitford emblem) adorns her gravestone

○ The Heythrop hunt usually meets at Batsford and Swinbrook each season