

Victoria Roper-Curzon (centre) and Rebecca Guinness (far right) with their children. All childrenswear throughout, Elfie London, except where stated

A CHARMED LIFE

The long-time friends Victoria Roper-Curzon and Rebecca Guinness create fanciful frocks and rainbow rompers with their childrenswear brand Elfie London, enchanting adults and little ones alike. By Flora Watkins

THIS PAGE: ELFIE (CENTRE) WEARS DRESS, £165; GANNI CARDIGAN, £39; BRODA HAT, ABOUT £40; MAISONMICHEL TIGHTS AND SHOES, HER OWN; OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT, VICTORIA WEARS DRESS, £165; WILSON AND RICH COAT, £95; REJINA P.V.O. SHOES, £95; MANOLO BLAHNIK, REBECCA WEARS SHIRT, £70; ERDEM COAT, £35; BRODA TROUSERS, SHOES AND JEWELLERY, HER OWN.

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FASHION



Below: Victoria's eldest child Elfie (right), the brand's namesake



pieces from trips home. 'In Spain, the traditional clothes are a bit quirkier, more fun than they are here – they don't just stick to pale pink and blue,' she explains. 'That's how I was dressing the children: lots of colours, almost party-

wear, slightly gypsy-ish. I thought there was a gap in the market, so I said to my sister, "Let's start." They decided to name the business after Victoria's eldest child, Elfie, who was then just a baby.

When her sister moved on in 2016, Victoria brought Rebecca into the Elfie fold, and the pair now share responsibility for designing the label's vibrant pieces. Rebecca, who has three children, is well placed to run the company: as a member of the glamorous Anglo-Irish dynasty, she has fashion flowing through her pedigree. Following an idyllic childhood spent between Wiltshire and Ireland, where she now lives in the company of 'tonnes of cousins', she spent several years working as a stylist and editor in New York; the fashion icon

Daphne Guinness is a first cousin, and she is also related to the models Jasmine Guinness and Lady Mary Charteris. Victoria, through marriage, belongs to a similarly large, racketsy country clan: her husband, Peter ('Pig' to his friends) Roper-Curzon, is the seventh of 11 children and grew up at the ancestral seat, Pylewell Park in the New Forest. Formerly based in west London, the family now live permanently on the Pylewell estate, at the romantically named Eat Me Drink Me Cottage – a beachfront abode that perfectly epitomises Elfie London's fanciful aesthetic.

The brand's winter collection is a joyous, seasonal expression of its designers' shared penchant for tradition and whimsy. Fairy tales and the characters of Enid Blyton are perennial features of their moodboards, as are the illustrations of Shirley Hughes and the books of Roald Dahl. 'This is quite a Shirley Hughes dress,' declares Victoria, shaking out the skirt of the gingham design with a Peter Pan collar that her youngest daughter Violet is wearing.

At an upright piano in the hall of a house set deep in the Wiltshire countryside, three enchanting, tousled-haired children go plinkety-plonk on the keys. In their velvet bloomers, Mary-Janes and tartan trousers, they could come straight out of a storybook: Mabel Lucie Attwell's illustrations from *Mother Goose*, perhaps, or the Pevensie children evacuated to the country in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The historic Fosbury Manor, which belongs to the Guinness family, is the sort of place where an imaginative child might have just such an adventure – so when seven-year-old Mabel Roper-Curzon wanders past in a smocked brown frock, it feels entirely appropriate to hear her mother describe it as the 'Narnia' dress. 'I've been wanting to create this for years and years,' says Victoria Roper-Curzon, as she re-ties the bow in Mabel's hair, 'and I finally found the right plaid brushed cotton.'

Favourite bedtime stories, now enjoyed with their own children, are a fertile source of inspiration for Victoria and her long-time friend Rebecca Guinness, the designers at the helm of Elfie London. Victoria initially founded the characterful childrenswear brand with her sister, Rafaela de Ascanio, in 2010, after finding herself frustrated by the lack of good children's clothing available in London and increasingly relying on her Spanish mother to bring back



THIS PAGE: REBECCA WEARS COTTON SHIRT, £995; SIMONE ROCHA, COTTON TRENCH-COAT, £725; JOSEPH, VELVET FLATS, £295; LE MONDE BERYL, VICTORIA WEARS BELTED DRESS, £660; GOAT, SATIN SHOES, £925; MANOLO BLAHNIK, OPPOSITE: ELFIE WEARS SILK DRESS, £295; CHLOÉ, VELVET FLATS, £295; LE MONDE BERYL, FELT HAT, ABOUT £480; MAISON MICHEL. SEE STOCKISTS FOR DETAILS. HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY AMY BRANDON, USING LIVING PROOF AND NARS

Boys' shirts are embroidered with frogs and mice peeking out of pockets, while a romper features the Big Bad Wolf pursuing the Three Little Pigs. 'Our thing is the unexpected take on the traditional,' explains Rebecca, 'something that kids would find fun. Although we do the classic pretty dresses that grown-ups like, we'll add rainbows in the smocking, unicorns or toadstools.'

This winsome formula has garnered Elfie some high-profile fans. The Shrimps founder Hannah Weiland, who is married to Rebecca's cousin Arthur, put her flower girls in striped Elfie dresses for their wedding, while the model Jade Parfitt, a good friend, also chose Elfie's classic frocks for her bridesmaids. And in the photos released for his first birthday, Prince Louis was pictured scrambling over a log wearing a burgundy jumper, one of the brand's earliest creations (originally designed with a little frog puppet in the pocket that, presumably, had long since been lost). The Duchess of Cambridge is 'the dream customer, of course,' says Rebecca, 'but for us, the story of it clearly not being a new piece and being passed down [from Prince George] was lovely, because this is something that we talk about a lot.'

Creating the hand-me-downs of the future is an important part of the Elfie narrative, as well as being a necessity in a big family. At Eat Me Drink Me Cottage, Victoria's children lead an active lifestyle – paddling on the beach, making dens by the lake or taking tea on the lawn – where grass stains and mud are actively encouraged. Those dresses might look as ethereal as an Arthur Rackham fairy drawing, but the designers know how vital it is that they're practical, too. 'The embroidery is a work of art, but it's strong,' stresses Roper-Curzon. 'I put everything in the washing machine – even the velvet.'

Recently, the pair have been expanding the interiors section of the Elfie London website, selling the same charming prints, books and shawls as the ones that adorn their own children's rooms. 'My style? Oh, it's *Nanny McPhee!*' says Victoria, laughing; think crocheted blankets, colourful layers, mismatched dining chairs and Beatrix Potter wallpaper. Interior design is an area she is keen to explore further, possibly as an offshoot of Elfie London, as is womenswear. 'But obstacles keep happening – like babies,' she says (Robin, the youngest of her six children, has just turned one), 'and now coronavirus. I love that saying, I can't wait until *precedented* times again, because these have been unprecedented.'

Happily for the child dressed in one of Elfie's toadstool rompers or lace-trimmed prairie dresses, adventures of the most unprecedented type are virtually guaranteed... □

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Above: Rebecca (left) and Victoria. Below: Fosbury Manor

