

Ghislaine Maxwell: From socialite to shadowy figure in a sex scandal; Daughter of a media mogul, darling of the cocktail scene, and friend Guy Kelly lifts the lid on a ul, of Jeffrey Epstein. mysterious life

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Body

In the photographs and footage, Ghislaine Maxwell often seems to be hiding in the background, or standing to one side, or feigning to look away ? but she's always there. There, behind her long-time "best friend", the disgraced billionaire financier Jeffrey Epstein and Donald Trump at the latter's model-filled party in his Mar-a-Lago residence in 1992. There, in the doorway beside the Duke of York and a 17-year-old Virginia Roberts Giuffre ? the woman who has alleged she had sex with the Duke that evening, and two other times, under Epstein's unspoken orders ? in London in 2001.

There, watching from a prime aisle seat as Bill Clinton gave away his daughter, Chelsea, at her wedding in 2010. Now, days after Epstein was found dead in his prison cell in New York, while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges, Maxwell may finally have to step in to the foreground and answer some questions. Namely: what exactly did she know about one of the most high profile, conspiracy-laden criminal scandals of recent history?

The story of how a British socialite ? the ninth and youngest child of the media mogul Robert Maxwell and his wife, Betty ? went from darling of the Manhattan cocktail party scene and friend to celebrities, politicians and members of the Royal family, to what Giuffre called (in documents unsealed by a US court on Friday, relating to a 2015 defamation suit) "convicted pedophile Jeffrey Epstein's procurer of underage girls", is as tangled as it is unsettling. Maxwell was born on Christmas Day in 1961. With her six siblings (a brother, Michael, died aged 23 in 1969, eight years after he was placed in a coma when seriously injured in a car crash; and a sister, Karine, died from leukaemia aged three in 1957) she grew up at the 53-room Headington Hill Hall in Oxford, where her father's publishing house, Pergamon Press, was also based.

By all accounts she was her father's favourite ? and the namesake of his luxury superyacht, Lady Ghislaine ? yet just as firmly under his tyrannical control as his other children, if not more so. In her book, Robert Maxwell As I Knew Him, writer Eleanor Berry recalled a conversation with a nine-year-old Ghislaine, who was expecting "a prearranged hiding" from her father.

"Daddy has a series of things lined up in a row," she reportedly told Berry. "There's a riding crop with a swish to it, another straight riding crop and a few shoehorns. He always asks me to choose which one I want." Later, when she enrolled at Balliol College, Oxford, having been schooled at Marlborough, Maxwell would apparently try to prevent

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her being seen with boyfriends, and banned them at the house ? any man in pursuit of his daughter was only after money, he suspected.

Maxwell died in 1991 ? found floating in the Atlantic Ocean, having apparently fallen overboard from Lady Ghislaine off the Canary Islands. A verdict of death by heart attack combined with accidental drowning was recorded, though six years later Ghislaine told Hello! magazine: "I think he was murdered."

The family business empire fell after Maxwell's death, and when it was discovered he'd left a £460 million black hole in the pension fund of Mirror Group Newspapers, two of his sons, Kevin and Ian, collapsed the company and stood trial for fraud. They were acquitted, but the Maxwell name was indelibly tarred. Ghislaine, by that time 30, fluent in several languages, a deep sea diver and a qualified helicopter pilot, had spent the previous years by her father's side at public events, and represented the family at social engagements.

At Longleat, the home of the Marquess and Lady Bath, she put on a Save the Children party in 1985 attended by Princess Margaret. It was another event in her life marked by a death: that evening, the Marquess's son, Lord Valentine Thynne, was found hanging from a bedspread attached to an oak beam in the lounge bar of the Bath Arms.

To flee the drama of the pensions scandal, Ghislaine set off for New York by Concorde, where her British accent and background made her instantly popular in Nineties Manhattan. After splitting with her great love, the Italian aristocrat Count Gianfranco Cicogna (a stunt pilot, he died in a fiery crash at an air show in South Africa in 2012), she is thought to have met the mysterious property developer Jeffrey Epstein at a party, beginning a long, unconventional relationship that may or may not have ever turned romantic.

Over the next decade, Epstein ? who Trump thought "a terrific guy [who] likes beautiful women as much as I do, and many of them are on the younger side" ? would be seen more frequently with Maxwell than anybody else. It sounded like a two-way arrangement: he gave her a foothold in New York, while she was a lot more sociable than him, charming Trump and the Clintons, and introducing Epstein to Prince Andrew and other British celebrities such as Naomi Campbell. It's been claimed she managed some of Epstein's properties and ran errands for him; one former worker from Epstein's Palm Beach mansion remembered her as "like the lady of the house", running ingoings and outgoing.

It was never clear if she had an official role, but she was visibly rich and British ? nobody thought to ask. Today, given the allegations against her, thinking of Maxwell as Epstein's "errandrunner" feels nauseating. Registered as a sex offender in Florida in 2008, he served 13 months of an 18-month jail term, before new accusers came forward over the next decade. Multiple women named Maxwell as the madam who introduced them to Epstein, who would take them to Little Saint James, a private island of the US Virgin Islands, or "lend" them to his famous friends.

Among the accusers was Guiffre, also known by her maiden name of Roberts, who filed a defamation suit against Maxwell in 2015, after Maxwell called claims that the former locker room attendant at Mar-a-Lago had been picked up by her, before Epstein all but ordered her to sleep with Prince Andrew, "fictitious lies." A judge at the time ordered all the allegations about Prince Andrew, who strongly denied "any form of sexual contact or relationship with Virginia Roberts", to be struck from the record for being "immaterial and impertinent."

The case was settled in May 2017 and the documents were sealed. After Epstein was arrested again in July, however, this time on federal charges for sex trafficking of minors in Florida and New York, the court ruled that 1,200 pages of those documents should be made public record. Among the statements, one implicated Maxwell via testimony that she was Epstein's "procurer of underage girls".

Now Epstein won't face justice, the full glare of the world's attention has switched to Maxwell, who quietly disappeared from the party circuit in 2016. She had been running TerraMar, a conservation non-profit group. On Friday, the organisation announced it will cease all operations, but its founder, who has homes in London and Salisbury, still hasn't been seen. "Ghislaine thought this was all dead and buried when the case was settled in 2017.

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So she was knocked for six when the Epstein stuff raised its ugly head again," a source close to her told The Daily Telegraph.

"She told everyone that it was just a rehash of the same old nonsense. She said that she planned to disappear and not say anything. Since then people haven't heard anything from her at all." For years, Ghislaine Maxwell was always there. Now the world needs answers, will she ever come back?

'She said that she planned to disappear ... Since then people haven't heard anything from her at all'

Graphic

Friends: A hug with Jeffrey Epstein portrait: by all accounts, Ghislaine father's favourite - amily portrait was her father A-list crowd: Ghislaine with her parents in 1987; with Jeffrey Epstein, Donald Trump and future wife Melania; and with Prince Andrew Ghislain wi

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