

A ROYALLY GOOD TIME

BY **DAISY PRINCE** | AVENUE | JULY 2016

The sun finally appeared for the last hour of daylight on the magnificent 18th-century Palladian façade of Houghton Hall.

Eighty guests, dressed in black tie, spilled out onto the lawn in front of the house, ready to enjoy A Taste of Norfolk—a gala evening in aid of EACH (East Anglia’s Children’s Hospices) for funds needed to build the Nook, Norfolk’s new children’s hospice.

Norfolk is three hours away from London. On the eve of the United Kingdom’s referendum vote that had been causing Londoners intense anxiety, it seemed worlds away. The mood was happy, lifted by the excitement of getting to meet the royal patron of the charity, HRH the Duchess of Cambridge, and by being in a marvelous house, filled with flowers. Phalanxes of staff were all ready to receive the highest rank in the land, exactly as the original owner, Sir Robert Walpole, the first Prime Minister of Great Britain, had intended.

For all the organization and anxiety that precedes a royal meeting, the royals themselves were completely unobtrusive. They each accepted a drink and stopped to say hello to friends and kissed the owners of Houghton Hall, the Marquess and Marchioness of Cholmondeley. Most people weren’t even aware they’d slipped into the crowd until we were gathered in groups of three and four and maneuvered into a horseshoe shape (the easiest way for the royals to shake hands).

Before too long, the Duchess of Cambridge made her way over to our little cluster. We’d all been prepared with the following royal protocol instructions:

“When meeting TRH, there is no need for ladies to curtsy. You may simply nod your head slightly (also known as bowing from the neck) or just shake hands. When address TRH you should address them in the first instance as ‘Your Royal Highness’ and thereafter as ‘Sir’ or ‘Ma’am’, pronounced to rhyme with ‘Ham.’”

Thus primed, we all waited patiently to meet the future Queen of England and one of the most famous women in the world.

Describing the appearance of someone so photographed, studied and analyzed, whose every elbow straightening causes the thunder of flashbulbs to go off, seems redundant. In the flesh, the Duchess of Cambridge looks exactly as she is pictured. Tall and slender as a willow, she has a mahogany head of hair so lustrous it’s easy to see why images of it have launched a thousand click-baits.

What is harder to derive from photos but much more apparent in person is how much work she puts into her job. Everyone at the gala was a paying guest and she was determined they should all have time with her. She laughed readily at some not especially funny jokes and always had her eyes focused on the person she was speaking with. While she didn’t employ the politician’s trick of touching the person she was talking to on the shoulder or arm to make a connection, she was empathic. I overheard her say on more than one occasion, “I know exactly what you mean.” She

smiled so much I found myself wondering if she has to ice her cheeks at night.

To maximize their time, the duke and duchess divided and conquered the crowd, so to speak, so all the guests had a moment with them. (Some got even more than their moment. After dinner, the Duke of Cambridge sneaked upstairs to check on an American lady who was too ill to attend dinner. A private visit from the future king of England was probably more than she’d bargained for [certainly more than she’d paid for] and an indication of his kindness toward those who support his wife’s charity.)

Finally, their rounds of introduction over, we headed into dinner.

But how the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge came to be a part of a black-tie gala of exceptional glamour is the accomplishment of a small group of Norfolk ladies (Emma Deterding, Polly Leicester, Davina Barber and Philippa Pease) who are determined to raise 10 million pounds to build the Nook.

The story begins with the gala cochair, Emma Deterding, who, when her youngest child was born, had just returned from a trip to Japan. Up late one night with jet lag, she happened to catch a program about children’s hospices and was so moved by its content that she ended up getting involved with EACH. That was more than 20 years ago.

As far as emotionally wrenching charitable causes go, it would be hard to find one that tops palliative care for children, so it was with some trepidation earlier that day that I decided to visit the existing hospice at Quidenham, thirty miles from where we were due to have dinner that evening. Hospice care is not as common in the United States, but it has been one of the United Kingdom’s great success stories, providing relief to many families from the all-consuming pressure of having to care for a terminally sick child. EACH’s original hospice was founded in 1989.

The red-brick hospice is located in a tranquil spot beside a Carmelite monastery, and it was closed on the day I was given a tour by EACH’s service manager, Jane Campbell. Although the building itself is very attractive, I was pretty astonished at how cramped it felt inside. Every spare inch was used, and the music therapy room was literally in a closet. Yet, despite these conditions, the team does so much with so little. Right now, the Quidenham hospice is caring for 119 children and 205 family members, who receive face-to-face well-being support. EACH cares for a total of 733 people in all of their hospices.

The part of the tour that made the deepest impression on me was a simply decorated room with green and blue butterfly sheets and a view of the playground out back. Known as the “cold room,” it’s where the parents might spend time for religious or emotional reasons with their recently deceased child and hopefully find a bit of peace.

There is great goodness in the work of EACH. One story I

found particularly touching was of a Lithuanian family who came to Quidenham and were longing for a dish from home. The chef cheerfully went on the internet and created a brilliant native meal. What a refreshing contrast to some of the tensions in the UK around European immigration which reached their peak during our visit.

The real meaning of EACH was summed up for me by the chief development officer, Dianne Rowe, as she gave me a lift to Holkham Hall, where I was due for a tour and tea with the Earl and Countess of Leicester: “We aim to help families create memories; ones which they will be able to treasure forever.”

I couldn't get her words out of my mind as the guests ascended the steps to enter Houghton's celebrated Stone Hall. The contrast between the hospice and the grand houses we were visiting couldn't have been greater, but the fact that so many locals of from all walks of life had rallied behind this cause was an example of the rarely mentioned sense of community that the British have.

As we sat down for a really splendid dinner created by some of England's finest chefs, beginning with scallop ceviche and ending with a Norfolk frozen yogurt delight accompanied by various wines, far too varied and delicious to mention individually. Anthony Horowitz, O.B.E., author of the Alex Rider book series, gave a moving speech, and EACH's Treehouse Choir performed poignantly.

Conversation with my dinner partners was as varied as the wines; one moment I was talking about the brutal backroom politics of the London mayoral race, and the next about London's Burning Man decompression party scene. As we segued into an intense discussion about the merits of Japanese bondage wear, I couldn't help thinking, as I glanced up toward the ceiling in the Stone Hall with its scenes of the Roman goddess Diana and frolicking Italian putti, what the Marquess of Cholmondeley's grandmother, Lady Sybil Sassoon, would have made of our racy conversation. As a leading hostess of her day, known to entertain artists, writers, musicians and other freethinkers, I think she would have been delighted.

After dinner we all ambled slowly, and well-sated into Houghton's saloon. Designed by William Kent, this room was covered from floor to ceiling with the original crimson hangings and material. It was a room designed for formal state entertaining and built to impress visitors. It still works. On one of the walls hung a portrait of the 1st Marquess of Cholmondeley, showing off his finely turned ankle, by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Another wall displayed what might have been akin to an 18th-century Christmas card portrait of Sir Robert Walpole with his family and friends.

Everyone moved back onto the balcony to commence smoking, flirting and admiring artist James Turrell's installation, which illuminated the west façade of the house in a constantly shifting

range of colors. The evening wasn't over yet, as the beautiful marchioness, Rose Cholmondeley, had invited everyone into the picture gallery for coffee, handmade chocolates and after-dinner liqueurs, including a signature lime and vodka cocktail. Their Royal Highnesses had slipped away by this time, so everyone finally felt they could let their hair down a bit.

As the night carried on and more cocktails were consumed, the Cholmondeleys began to look slightly nervous as to when all of their guests might actually leave their house. But just before 1 a.m., people started to retreat toward their very thoughtfully provided cars (no one wanted to drive home after such an evening as that). The goodie bags were full of weighty and wonderful things: a notebook, cashmere socks, a gold bracelet from Monica Vinader and a 24-carat chocolate gold lollipop for those somehow still hungry after such copious amounts of food.

The next day, I met with the Earl of Leicester, an attractive father of four, whose Holkham Hall is another triumph of Palladian architecture in Norfolk and who gave me a brief tour of his estate, including the new, dedicated events venue, the Lady Elizabeth Wing, which just opened in June this year.

The earl's wife, Polly, the Countess of Leicester, was cochair of A Taste of Norfolk. It was originally through the earl and countess that the Duchess of Cambridge became involved with the Nook. Sitting in a room with a view over the spectacular Italianate gardens designed by William Kent, the earl told me that the connection to TRH came through a friend he had from his days as an army equerry. “The Duchess of Cambridge was newly married and probably didn't have too many organizations which she was a patron of. She's taken it in her stride and got very involved in the charity.”

Finally, it was back on the train to London to be greeted by the anxious buzzing of a city in the throes of the Brexit vote and an uncertain economic future. There is nothing anxious about Norfolk, the Cholmondeleys, the Leicesters and even TRH the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. From what I saw, no matter what the future of the United Kingdom will be, the fate of this charity is in good hands. If history has taught us one thing, it's that when the English set their minds to something, it will get done.