



Barbara Cartland Estate

'People notice me and that makes them listen.' Barbara Cartland in trademark pink with bouquets, Pekingese and glitz. Portrait by Norman Parkinson

# Return of the Queen of Romance

Twenty years after the death of record-breaking novelist Dame Barbara Cartland, Gillian Thornton talks passions, plots and a new audience with her son at the family home in Essendon



‘Now don’t show your friends or they’ll all want one.’ Dame Barbara Cartland was deadly serious as she handed me a small box wrapped in pink paper. Opening it under her watchful eye, I found a Staffordshire enamel pillbox. A pair of cutesy cherubs danced around her initials on the lid; interlinked pink hearts adorned the sides; and written inside, her favourite word in the entire English language. Love.

It’s 20 years since the Queen of Romantic Fiction died at her beloved Camfield Place, a mansion once owned by Beatrix Potter’s grandfather on the outskirts of Essendon. Born in the year that Queen Victoria died, Dame Barbara was two months’ short of her 99th birthday but had written her final book just three years before, prophetically entitled *This Way to Heaven*.

Barbara Cartland holds the record as the world’s most prolific author with 723 books to her name, and, despite changes in literary taste, is still ranked as the world’s best-selling writer of romantic fiction. She’s third in the overall fiction stakes after William Shakespeare and Agatha Christie.

I interviewed Dame Barbara on several occasions during the ’80s and ’90s, genuinely looking forward to every pink-hued occasion. Flamboyant and outspoken to the last, she was a journalist’s dream, peppering her conversation with a series of quotable soundbites and guaranteed to have an opinion on everything. With her colourful outfits and increasingly heavy make-up, she was easy to mock, but it didn’t worry her.

‘Don’t you see?’ she would say, as though explaining something to a small child. ‘People notice me and that makes them listen.’ Underneath the eye-catching exterior was a woman who cared deeply about society and devoted her life to spreading happiness through her books and extensive charity work.

So I’m delighted to be invited back to Camfield Place to reminisce with Ian McCorquodale, the elder of Barbara’s two sons and her literary manager for more than 60 years. Ian has lived at Home Farm on the estate since 1972, now joined by his family, while



With the Salvation Army at Camfield Place. Dame Barbara was a great supporter of charities



Dame Barbara Cartland on her 95th birthday in 1996, at home at Camfield Place. The house, now lived in by her youngest son, is much as she left it

Globe Photos/Zuma Press/Aamy Stock Photo

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younger brother Glen divides his time between London and their mother's former home.

'We moved here in 1949 when I was 12,' says Ian as we settle at one end of the large room that doubles as office and sitting room. 'My father had been gazumped on another local property so when Camfield came on the market, he snapped it up, along with 750 acres and 25 cottages, which proved a huge liability. Now we are down to 400 acres.'

Home Farm is just a short walk from the main house, homely rather than grand, and in muted country colours instead of pinks and turquoise. Ian laughs when I recall my first meeting with his mother in her vast living room. Ushered in from the library by one of her team of secretaries, I was confronted with chintz

furnishings, lavish ornaments, and a huge floral arrangement that stood on a pedestal in the bay window.

I could hear the tinkle of bracelets, but for a few seconds couldn't see Dame Barbara until she suddenly appeared to step out of the wallpaper. Her clothes blended perfectly with the bright shades she had adopted on the advice of Howard Carter who found them inside Tutankhamun's tomb.

Here at Home Farm, small birds flit among the branches of ancient rhododendrons that overlap the windows, and Ian's friendly terrier snuggles up beside me on the squishy sofa. Outside, there is nothing but birdsong.

'My mother loved it here, as do I,' continues Ian. 'It's so peaceful. But the future of the house is a

dilemma. Beatrix Potter came here regularly and painted the animals and wildlife, so it has connections with two literary legends, but we really don't want to open it to the public for visits or weddings, as it would spoil our peace. I think we will leave the decision to the next generation.'

He adds that the main house is largely as his mother left it – 'as though she has just put her pen down and gone out to the garden. My mother was very fond of Hertfordshire and often worked it into her novels. The hero – or villain – would have a mansion in the county. Living here certainly helped her write all her wonderful books.'

While Ian readily admits that her plots were often similar, he insists there is always a twist. Barbara Cartland wrote 675 romantic novels, turning out a staggering 400 titles in her last 20 years alone. She wrote about love and romance, purity and femininity, but never about sex. The hero and heroine always got married and the reader was never permitted through the bedroom door.

'When my mother was 77, her publishers begged her for more



Portrait of Barbara Cartland in the 1940s by royal photographer Dorothy Wilding





books but after 10 years or so, the market began to change. They wanted sex in the stories, but she wouldn't have it. "I'm writing for young girls who keep themselves for the man they love" she insisted.

'Mother always maintained that she had 56 proposals of marriage, though I suspect she added a few on! Unfortunately she accepted the wrong one, marrying my father's cousin Alexander McCorquodale in 1927. But nine years later, she married my father Hugh and they were blissfully happy for 27 years. Sadly he died at just 66, left with one lung after fighting at the Battle of Passchendaele as an 18-year-old. Mother lost her father in World War I which was why she turned to writing to make money, and she lost both her brothers at Dunkirk.'

But literary success brought with it the chance to live a more luxurious lifestyle and to champion good causes. When home at Camfield, her routine was highly disciplined. She settled down on her chaise-longue each afternoon at 1.30, a rug over her knees and her dogs at her feet, then dictated a chapter until 3.30. In a fortnight, she could complete one book and read up on her history for the next.

'I simply say a prayer and ask God to give me a plot,' she once told me. 'But not two because that's inconvenient. He's given me the most complicated plot today, but the other day He was a bit slow and

I thought perhaps the Almighty was a bit fed up with me. So I asked the girls to bring me everything I have on Regency and while they were fetching it, something said to me quite clearly Suez Canal.'

Journalists were always invited

**'I simply ask God to give me a plot. But not two because that's inconvenient'**

at 4 for a chat in the drawing room ('You must use a tape machine, my dear! I don't have time to wait whilst journalists take things down in bad shorthand.') On the stroke of 5, we would transfer to the dining room for tea. Honey on the comb for her; dolls' house-sized cakes and sandwiches for the writer; titbits on bone china saucers for the dogs. And all the time, the tape kept running. This was when she would talk expansively about her local involvement. The setting up in 1964 of a permanent traveller site, Barbaraville, on the outskirts of Hatfield. Her nine years as a Conservative county councillor for Hatfield. And her endless charity work and appearances.

Now, two decades after her death, Barbara Cartland's literary output is enjoying a new lease of life, thanks to Ian who was left 160 unpublished novels in her will. He has published them monthly as the

Pink Collection, all now available to buy via his website. The British appetite for her style of fiction may have waned in recent years, but foreign editions are bringing purity and virgins to a receptive new audience in languages ranging from Swedish and Danish to Polish and Turkish. 'She's also very big in America and India.'

Only once, Ian reveals, did his mother write a novel with an unhappy ending, just to gauge reaction. Instead of marital bliss, the hero rode off on his white charger and the heroine went into a nunnery. Such was the outcry from fans that Dame Barbara changed the ending for the next reprint.

Ask Ian what he thinks his mother was most proud of and he immediately cites her legacy. 'She wanted to bring happiness to the world and she realised at a young age that she could do that by writing romance. Fans told her that when they felt miserable, they had simply to reread the last chapter of their favourite novel to feel happy again.

'Personally, I'm just delighted to welcome new generations of readers. Everyone wants love and romance, and I'm immensely proud of her for bringing it to people across the world.'

Dame Barbara now rests at Camfield Place close to her beloved dogs beneath an oak tree reputedly planted by Elizabeth I. She didn't – Ian laughs – 'want to be in the churchyard with all those sinners'. Her family and a few friends sang a favourite Perry Como song, *I Believe*, and the sun shone until a sudden summer downpour seemed to indicate that Barbara now wanted them all gone!

Before I take my leave of Ian, he delves into a cupboard and presents me with a novel from the Pink Collection to go with the many gifted to me by his mother. A gilded oak leaf too from that Elizabethan tree, reputed to grant my wish. What should I ask for, I wonder, as the electric gates to Cartland Country shut tight behind me. But there's no choice. It has to be love. What more could any girl possibly want? ♦

*For more on the Pink Collection and the life and works of Dame Barbara Cartland, visit [barbaracartland.com](http://barbaracartland.com)*