

How Fergie and the Duchess in the hit movie are directly related through an illegitimate child

By [Laura Collins](#)

Last updated at 1:06 AM on 21st September 2008

Like 6

In a heart-rending scene in the hit movie, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, gives away her love child by a future Prime Minister . . . and incredibly, today we can reveal how that abandoned child is directly related to the Duchess of York and her two daughters.

It is not a scene that requires words – the anguish is clear in every strained expression and repressed cry. Kissing her baby's head, inhaling her scent one final time, the young woman hands the tiny bundle into the care of another. She is her mother no more.

This is the defining moment in the life of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire . . . and Keira Knightley plays out the scene for every possible tug of the heartstrings in the new blockbuster film *The Duchess*, which tells Georgiana's story.





Well connected: Keira Knightley's character Georgiana in the new movie, is directly related to the Duchess of York, Sarah Ferguson, and her two daughters

The baby is Georgiana's child by her lover, Whig politician Sir Charles Grey, played by Dominic Cooper.

Georgiana is already pregnant with his child when her husband uncovers her infidelity. She is sent to France to give birth in exile and then informed by the humiliated Duke that she must give up her lover and have his child adopted – or lose the daughters and the son she had borne him.

All that is left for Georgiana, as her baby is taken, is to call out: 'Her name is Eliza.'

That is the last we see of Eliza. We are told that her mother returned to the Duke and re-entered society, while Charles Grey married and became Prime Minister. In the film, little Eliza is simply absorbed by history.

So what did become of that child? The Mail on Sunday decided to investigate the mystery and, in the process, unearthed perhaps the most extraordinary legacy of all.

Remarkably, Eliza is key to the strongest line of descent uniting Georgiana with our current Royal Family.



Latest in the line: Georgiana would never have imagined that the descendants of her illegitimate child Eliza would be Princess' Eugenie and Beatrice

Although the bloodline has been overlooked for generations, our investigation has revealed that it runs directly from Georgiana through Eliza to Georgiana's great, great, great, great, great granddaughter – Sarah Ferguson, Duchess of York.

It is a startling discovery. For, while much has been made of the familial bond between Georgiana 'the Empress of Fashion', and her great great, great, great niece Diana Spencer, hers is not the most direct line of descent.

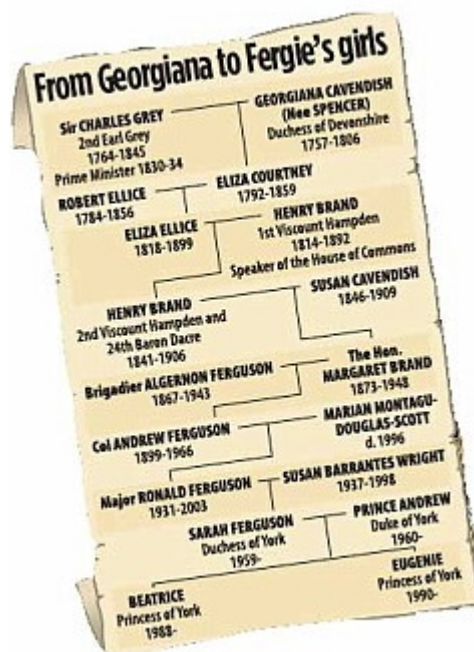
That line leads to Fergie, a woman every bit as vivacious and outrageous as her forebear. Social mores may have compelled Georgiana to give up her daughter and subsequent generations attempted to erase Eliza from family records.

But 200 years of history conspired to bring her descendant back into the fold when Fergie married Prince Andrew, Duke of York, in 1986.

In the film, the dramatic handover of baby Eliza takes place on a bleak northern moor, with mud underfoot and a leaden sky.

But it is not an entirely faithful account of the day early in 1792 when the real Georgiana surrendered her youngest child.

She was six months pregnant when William Cavendish, Duke of Devonshire discovered her infidelity – a fact which speaks volumes for the distance that existed between the couple.



The family tree

Georgiana had been staying in Bath, where Grey visited her frequently and indiscreetly, while the Duke remained in their London home, Devonshire House.

Towards the end of 1791, prompted by society gossip, William made a surprise visit to his wife. His ultimatum followed swiftly and predictably: Give up Grey and his child or lose everything.

Later, Georgiana, who was 34, reflected on her decision in a letter to a friend: 'I have, in leaving Grey, left my heart and soul. He has one consolation, that I have given him up for my children only.'

The pregnant Georgiana travelled to France with her sister, Harriet, and Lady Elizabeth Foster – a woman who occupied a bizarre dual role as Georgiana's closest friend and the Duke's mistress.

Eliza was born on February 20, 1792, and given the surname Courtney, a name Georgiana took from her mother's family.

In the film, Keira Knightley's Duchess nurses her child for some weeks before a tender goodbye, but the reality was more brutal.

As Amanda Foreman explains in her biography, *Georgiana, Duchess Of Devonshire*, the child was taken from her arms almost immediately after birth, given to a foster family and, when she was deemed old enough to travel, sent to England to live with Charles Grey's parents in Falloden, Northumberland.

Meanwhile the Duke ensured that the inevitable gossip circulating in London was swiftly stamped out.

Showing a surprising flair for spin he planted a story in society magazine *Bon Ton*, claiming that the Duchess of Devonshire was spending the summer in Switzerland and would be wintering in Nice.

'This,' it was pointed out, 'fully contradicts the vague reports that have been circulating of these noble personages.'

The only person who seems to have remained completely in the dark about her parentage for any length of time was Eliza herself.

An agreement was reached between Georgiana and Grey's family that she should be allowed to visit Eliza very occasionally in Northumberland and act as a sort of unofficial godmother.

She sent her presents, poetry, little watercolours and drawings and nursery gifts.

As for her father, Eliza thought that Charles Grey was simply a kind and much older brother.

Eliza's half-siblings – Georgiana's children with the Duke – knew the truth. The eldest, also Georgiana but known as Little G, was eight when her half-sister was born; Harriet, known as Harryo, was six; and the Duke's heir, the Marquis of Hartington, known as Hart, was only three but their mother never concealed her from them.

In fact they would visit Eliza with their mother, yet they all kept the secret.

How Fergie and the Duchess in the hit movie are directly related through an illegitimate child | Mail O...

In later years the Cavendishes blotted out paragraphs of Georgiana's letters to her legitimate children, in which she refers to their half-sister, in a prim Victorian attempt to erase the shame of Eliza's birth. But some papers survive.

Among them is a diary entry written by 'Harryo' when, at the age of 25, she visited the Greys and noted sadly: 'Eliza is a fine girl, and will, I think, be handsome; but tho' they are kind to her, it goes to my heart to see her – she is so evidently thrown into the background and has such a look of mortification about her that it is not pleasant, yet he [Charles Grey] seems very fond of her.'

However much they may have tried, it seems the Greys could not help but treat their illegitimate grandchild as a second-class citizen.

Still, Eliza's is not an unremittingly sad tale. Unlike her mother she was not subject to the aristocratic pressure to marry 'well'. Perhaps as a result, and rather ironically, she married better than many of her legitimate relations.



Eliza's legacy: The Duke of Devonshire, played by Ralph Fiennes in film The Duchess, discovers Georgiana's infidelity and forces his wife to give up baby Eliza

She was the most beautiful of all Georgiana's children. Talkative and charming, she was able to marry for love and she did.

She met and fell for Robert Ellice when his older brother Edward married Hannah Grey – a woman Eliza believed to be her sister but who was, in fact, her aunt.

It isn't known how or when Eliza learned the truth about Georgiana and Charles Grey but at some point after her marriage she did.

By then her mother was dead and Eliza reflected how, of everybody in her childhood, the woman she had believed to be her godmother was 'always the most kind'.

When Eliza gave birth to her first child she named her Georgiana. But it was her second child, a daughter whom she named Eliza, who leads us to Sarah Ferguson today.

The younger Eliza married Henry Brand, 1st Viscount Hampden, who went on to become Speaker of the House of Commons.

Brand had no university education nor legal training, both normally prerequisites for such a role. But he did have a rather powerful mentor in the figure of Sir George Grey, Charles Grey's younger brother, who employed Brand as his private secretary and oversaw his rapid rise.

Many years earlier, Georgiana had written a poem for her daughter Eliza vowing: 'And should th'ungenerous world upbraid thee/for mine and for thy father's ill/A nameless mother oft shall assist thee/A hand unseen protect thee still.'

When Sir George Grey extended his patronage to Henry Brand, husband to Georgiana's granddaughter, the 'unseen hand' of Eliza Courtney's true parentage reached down across the generations.

Eliza and Henry Brand had a son, also Henry, who married and produced a daughter, the Honourable Margaret Brand. She would eventually fall in love with the rather dashing and grandly named Brigadier Algernon Francis Holford Ferguson, an officer with the Life Guards who lived in Polebrook Hall, in Oundle, Northamptonshire.

Their marriage was a happy one but not without its sorrows. They had five children – two daughters and three sons. The youngest son,

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1058777/How-Fergie-Duchess-hit-movie-directly-related-ill...>

How Fergie and the Duchess in the hit movie are directly related through an illegitimate child | Mail O...

George, died in 1911 at the age of six. The eldest, Victor, was killed at the Somme aged 20.

Only Andrew survived to carry the Ferguson name down to the next generation. He rose to the rank of Colonel in the Life Guards and married and fathered two sons – John, who died at the age of ten, and Ronald, who would become Major Ron Ferguson, Fergie's father.

Georgiana could never have dared imagine that the descendants of the child she loved and relinquished would one day number a Duchess and two princesses – Beatrice and Eugenie.

Perhaps she might have allowed herself a smile had she known that her great granddaughter many times removed would be noted for bringing a high-spirited sense of fun into an otherwise austere aristocratic realm, as Georgiana herself once did. Even if she did, at times, make the same mistakes.

For Georgiana and Fergie have more than their genes and the title of Duchess in common. A glance at the ledger of Coutts bank would be proof of that.

Throughout her married life Georgiana ran up enormous debts – the equivalent of millions in today's money – and often turned to Thomas Coutts for loans in return for introducing his daughter to society.

As she lay in exile in France, preparing for Eliza's birth all those years ago, Georgiana reflected on this and decided to set her affairs in order: childbirth was, after all, a dangerous business.

She made her will, wrote letters to each of her children telling them how much they were loved and she offered them this advice: 'Learn to be exact about expense – I beg you as the best Legacy I can leave you – never to run into debt for the most trifling sum; I have suffered enough from a contrary conduct.'

More than 200 years later her great, great, great, great, great granddaughter looked back on a £3million overdraft held with Thomas Coutts's descendants and reflected: 'It took me ten years to get into debt and eight years to get out.'

Her advice as a mother, she said, would be: 'Check your behaviour and learn to ask for help, not for loans.'

History does indeed have a strange way of repeating itself.