

# The Gloucester Horror

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The importance of a 'clean' genetic history in dynastic politics throughout history cannot be overstated. Apart from wealth and power, a viable heir must be healthy and presentable – at least initially. Perhaps this is even truer in the age of mass communication.

According to history, Thomas Lyon-Bowes – granduncle to the late Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother – was born and died on 21 October 1821. According to legend, however, he was born deformed and immediately baptised as Christian but unexpectedly survived the antenatal period. His noble parents are said to have pretended Thomas had died, while keeping him hidden from view in a secret room within the walls of the family seat, Glamis Castle, Scotland. Various versions of the legend describe Thomas as 'half-man, half-frog', or barrel-chested, with toy-like arms and legs. These descriptions of 'the Monster of Glamis' can be dismissed as inherently implausible.

But again, according to history, there really was a secret room in Glamis Castle. In 1968, the 16th Earl Strathmore told royal biographer Michael Thornton that the chamber had been accessible via a hidden door from the castle's map room but that he had had it bricked-up.<sup>1</sup> The Earl did not confirm the existence of the 'monster' to Mr Thornton – but perhaps tellingly, he declined to deny it.

Also according to history, Thomas's lifetime of captivity would not have been the only time a genetic abnormality had been concealed for decades by the Strathmore dynasty. Well into the 20th century, the Queen Mother's family falsely declared two of her nieces dead in Burke's Peerage. Catherine and Nerissa Bowes-Lyon were in fact secretly committed to a

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<sup>1</sup> An admission recorded in Mr Thornton's exhaustive *Royal Feud: The Duchess of Windsor and the Queen Mother* (Michael Joseph, 1985)

mental institution, on account of their severe learning disabilities, eventually dying for real during the 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

This terrible deception can only give a degree of plausibility to the legend of the Glamis Monster: the freakish descriptions of 'Thomas', who would have been the rightful Earl Strathmore, could be folkloric embellishments on a similar disability or even something as commonplace as Down's Syndrome – not at all understood in late Hanoverian times and certainly not desirable in the reputation of a dynastic bloodline. To this day a section of the ramparts of Glamis Castle, on which the 'monster' is said to have been exercised under cover of night, is known as 'the Mad Earl's Walk'.

At around the same time that Michael Thornton visited Glamis, another member of the Royal Family was becoming very concerned about the health of a family member. In August that year, the Duchess of Gloucester (later Princess Alice, deceased 2004) asked physician Henry Bellringer to examine her son, Prince William of Gloucester, born 1941, who was then seventh in line to the throne.<sup>3</sup>

The prince had been suffering from an unpleasant skin condition for the preceding five years, the onset of which had itself been preceded by a feverish and nauseous condition over the Christmas and New Year period of 1964-65. Since at the time of this acute affliction the prince had recently arrived in Lagos, Nigeria, to take up a diplomatic position, Malaria was initially suspected. However, after the acute condition had subsided, the prince was plagued with 'quite large' blisters that appeared continuously on his hands, chest and face. These sores took a long time to heal and left conspicuous scars. The patient also reported that his urine was sometimes darkly discoloured. Since the prince was about to depart for another diplomatic role in Japan, Dr Bellringer made a tentative diagnosis of porphyria and arranged to see him on

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<sup>2</sup> <<https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=6kFhAAAIBAJ&sjid=NnUNAAAIBAJ&dq=nerissa+bowes-lyon&pg=6104,1956199&hl=en>>

<sup>3</sup> Prince Charles apparently idolised his dashing and charismatic cousin and Charles's first son, the present Duke of Cambridge, was named in his memory.

his return to the UK.

In August 1970, Dr Bellringer was finally able to examine Prince William again. In the intervening two years the prince had accumulated many more scars and blemishes and at the time of the appointment also had many active and fluid-filled blisters on his hands and face. A second opinion was sought from a consultant at Addenbrookes later that year and blood tests confirmed the two opinions: Dr Bellringer eventually recorded in his notes that 'there can be scarcely any doubt that this is a case of porphyria'.<sup>4</sup>

Porphyria is an umbrella term for a family of conditions known as the porphyrias, the genetic description of which need not detain us, except to say briefly that porphyrins are required by the body to produce heme, the oxygen-binding agent in human blood. Porphyrin abnormalities fall into two types: the acute variety affects the nervous system producing symptoms such as unpredictable mental disturbances, muscular weakness and stomach problems; the cutaneous variety blights the victim with gradual skin and tissue destruction. The porphyrias were only described in the late 19th century, meaning that medical science has in historical terms only recently been able to address them adequately. The telltale sign of all the porphyrias is discoloured urine, classically purple but sometimes tending to either the red or blue components of the shade. Prince William of Gloucester was twice cursed – his diagnosis was variegate porphyria, meaning he suffered both acute and cutaneous varieties.

Advanced cutaneous porphyria is a horrific disease. Accelerated by sunlight, exposed areas of the sufferer's flesh gradually necrotise, leaving the victim resembling an animated but semi-decayed corpse. Digits are reduced to stumps and among other effects, the nose, lips, eyelids and ears gradually disintegrate. In 1985, an academic famously (and persuasively) theorised that cutaneous porphyria is the

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<sup>4</sup> This summary of Prince William's condition, treatment and diagnosis is condensed from pages 213-219 of *Purple Secret: Genes, 'Madness' and the Royal Houses of Europe*, by Rohl, Warren and Hunt (Bantam Press, 1998), which remains the key text for those interested in the historical role of porphyria.

historical origin of the vampire myth.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, the aversion to sunlight and mirrors makes immediate sense.

It is impossible to say when porphyria, a strongly heritable condition, entered Britain's Royal Family. Prince William of Gloucester was a grandson of George V and his consort, Princess Mary of Teck.<sup>6</sup> Mary's ancestors can be traced back to the infamous and all-too-real Vlad III of Transylvania, AKA 'The Impaler'. Vlad Dracul, to give him his proper name, notably inspired Bram Stoker's Count Dracula, whose filmic portrayal by Bela Lugosi was so hugely influential on the modern version of the vampire myth, upgrading vampires from the shambling blood-drinking animated corpses of European folklore to the now stereotypical articulate but decadent aristocrats and nobles. However, this seems to be nothing more than an ironic coincidence,<sup>7</sup> as porphyria appears to have been present in British royalty well before Mary of Teck married George V; and in any case there is no evidence that Vlad III suffered from porphyria to add to his

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5 <<https://suite.io/diane-evans/2fha2zt>>

6 Princess Mary was originally betrothed to George's older brother, Prince Albert Victor, the first son of Edward VII, whose unfortunate genetic inheritance included deafness, and abnormally long arms and neck that were disguised with tailored clothing, earning him the nickname 'collars and cuffs'. Albert Victor may have had a learning disability, with one of his tutors calling him 'abnormally deficient' and another complaining 'he hardly understands the meaning of the words "to read".' The reasons for Albert Victor's many problems are not understood, although it is perhaps worth noting that his paternal grandparents, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, were first cousins. Albert Victor died in 1892 of an acute and unknown illness (while under the supervision of two Royal doctors who were subsequently knighted) well before he could inherit the throne. The fact that the Princess was then married off to Edward's now heir Prince George strengthens the impression that more was going on in this dynastic union than is now known. For example, Anne Edwards, author of a reputable biography of Queen Mary entitled *Matriarch*, openly discusses the possibility that Albert Victor was allowed to die or perhaps actively murdered in a perverse 'mercy killing' carried out for the dynasty's sake.

7 As is the fact that Princess Michael of Kent is descended from the father of Eleonore of Schwarzenberg, 'the Vampire Princess'. See <<http://www.ancientworlds.net/aw/Article/1296223>>.

unrestrained psychopathy.<sup>8</sup>

Since porphyria is such a 'new' illness, it was only in the 1960s that it was realised that the acute variety of the disease was the probable reason for the then unsolved mystery of the insanity that repeatedly afflicted King George III (1738-1820). The fact that George's urine was recorded by a physician as being blue-indigo in colour seems to clinch the matter, but the porphyria theory is still contested, as there are few clearly described precedents for George's supposed porphyria in royal history that occurred before the advent of modern medical science.<sup>9</sup>

In 1966, Dr Ida Macalpine and colleagues advanced the then unheard of porphyria theory in a paper, 'The "insanity" of King George III: A classic case of porphyria'.<sup>10</sup> The same team followed this up in January 1968 with a study of possible porphyrias in the houses of Stewart, Hanover and Prussia.<sup>11</sup> Seven months later, as awareness was spreading among historians concerning the disease's postulated role in Royal history, Princess Alice called Dr Bellringer to examine her son's mysterious malady. Two years later, Prince William's porphyria was clinically established as a fact. Two years after that he was killed in a plane crash, the causes of which are far from clear.

## **The crash**

**O**n 28 August 1972, Prince William – a keen pilot with his own single-engined Piper Arrow – took part in the Goodyear International Trophy air race, started at Halfpenny Green Airfield, Staffordshire. Thirty seconds after takeoff, witnesses saw the prince's plane 'drop out of the sky' and explode on

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<sup>8</sup> It is to my mind plausible that the disease itself is the actual origin and 'calling card' of European royal houses (royals being jocularly known in Britain as having 'blue blood'), since the classical sign of purple urine was precisely the colour of the rarest and costliest dye known in ancient times, only extractable from one particular sea mollusc until it was finally synthesised during the mid-19th Century.

<sup>9</sup> <<http://www.rsc.org/education/eic/issues/2008Mar/GeorgeIIIindigoBlueRingTest.asp>>

<sup>10</sup> <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1843211/>>

<sup>11</sup> <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1984936/>>

hitting the ground. The crash was watched by 30,000 spectators. It took two hours to bring the fire under control and retrieve the bodies of the prince and his friend and co-pilot Vyrell Mitchell from the wreckage.<sup>12</sup> The men were identified by dental records the next day as an Inquest on the pair was opened and adjourned by South Staffordshire Coroner Dennis Cave.<sup>13</sup> On the same day, a formal investigation of the crash was opened by the Accident Investigation Branch of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

The Coroner was recorded as saying that 'it would not be proper to hear evidence on the cause of the crash until the Accident Investigation Branch had reached its findings'.

On 29 November the Inquest resumed and the jury heard that the piloting prince had made too sharp a turn at a 'scatter point', colliding with a tree before hitting the ground. (A scatter point is a marking point at which aircraft in paired takeoffs part routes.) The Jury were told that DTI examiners had ascertained that the wrecked plane had been in perfect working order and also heard from a Board of Trade investigator who said analysis suggested 'nothing more than an error of judgement by the pilot'.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the Jury returned a verdict of Accidental Death.

However, when the DTI's report on the crash was published in September 1973, the report did not blame pilot error, simply recording a 'narrative finding' that the prince appeared to have manoeuvred sharply to avoid a wing clipping some houses along the ascent portion of his flight path. Section 2.1 of the report stated:

'It was at first thought that the accident had resulted from some error in flying technique. However, a frame-by-frame examination of [BBC Television News] film shows that at about 21.5 seconds after starting the takeoff, and whilst very steeply banked, the aircraft was pulled very sharply in a manner indicative of an abrupt

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<sup>12</sup> *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 29 August 1972

<sup>13</sup> *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 28 August 1972

<sup>14</sup> *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 7 September 1973

application of full stabilator control. This implies some compelling external influence rather than a simple flying error.'

The hypothesised 'external influence' was the prince's supposed desire not to collide with any of the houses along the ascent, a verdict concurred with by eyewitness Jessie Bishop, who said: '[The prince] could have caused many deaths if he hadn't taken the action. There were many people right down the road [under his flightpath].' Two more eyewitnesses agreed: Jean Baron stated her belief that the prince had been trying to avoid hitting the houses, and Catherine Gibson said: 'I am sure he was trying to avoid the road.'<sup>15</sup> The previously suspected 'scatter points' were dismissed by the DTI as non-contributory.

Conflicts with the Inquest notwithstanding, the DTI accident investigation file was then deposited in the National Archives.

## **The secret file**

The DTI's file on Prince William's crash (AVIA 101/745) was listed in the National Archives catalogue as 'exempt' from release, citing regulation 18 of the Civil Aviation Regulations (1996). This gave the Archives a clear 100 years before the file's release. However, the matter was not as straightforward as the responsible archivist had apparently thought. Civil Aviation Regulation 18 (3) defines 'relevant records' (i.e., exempted documents) by reference to a list contained in annex 13 of the Convention on International Civil Aviation. This annex is not a set of absolute exemptions. It quite clearly states that the types of record listed *can* be released if the impetus for doing so outweighs the *potential* (n.b.) impact on the investigation in question or on any other.

Crucially, annex 13 has an explanatory note appended explicitly stating that the purpose of the exemptions is to ensure that people interviewed during an investigation are not subjected to 'inappropriate' civil/criminal/professional proceedings as a result of their evidence being made public, a

<sup>15</sup> *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 7 September 1972

development which *could* (n.b.) discourage people from speaking openly to future investigations. In other words, the Annex is not absolutely prohibitive but instead identifies varieties of records which could be released after consideration on a case-specific basis.<sup>16</sup>

Since both the prince and his co-pilot are dead, since it has never been suggested that anyone else was at fault in any way, and since the information was over 40 years old, I filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the National Archives in March 2015, arguing that that the listed document exemptions in Annex 13 are plainly purpose-specific and certainly could not be automatically presumed applicable in this particular case. After months of tantalising bureaucratic toing and froing, the file was opened without fanfare in June 2015 and I was able to travel to Kew and examine it for myself.

As is so often the case with FOI-responsive material, the file is far from straightforward or self-explanatory, consisting of correspondence nearly devoid of context, written references to unrecorded conversations, obscure diagrams, technical jargon and assorted indecipherable or irrelevant pages. There are also some withheld documents, chiefly the autopsy reports and photographs of the dead men. These are being kept back apparently because the prince's co-pilot 'may have' family who would be distressed by their release. This is far from being an ascertained factor and the late prince himself had no family of his own, so the assumption has to be that the habitual secrecy surrounding everything Royal has influenced declassification. Also withheld in its entirety (spuriously, in my view, by reference to the Data Protection Act) is the statement of a single eyewitness to the crash. All these exemptions could be contested, I believe, but there is currently no reason to suspect that the withheld documents would add significantly to our understanding.

What is abundantly clear from what has been declassified, however, is that the DTI's investigation did not do its job properly at all. One document records that, contrary to

16 <[http://www.emsa.europa.eu/retro/Docs/marine\\_casualties/annex\\_13.pdf](http://www.emsa.europa.eu/retro/Docs/marine_casualties/annex_13.pdf)>



the DTI experts heard by the prince's Inquest, the aircraft's cockpit instruments were completely destroyed by the fire after the crash and could hardly therefore be said to have been in 'perfect working order' as the Inquest was assured.

A pro-forma document completed by an anonymous investigator lists as its fifth checkpoint: 'Any evidence of pre-crash failure in aircraft or equipment', to which the handwritten answer is a single circled question mark. The same cryptic glyph is recorded against the pro-forma's question of whether the crash was 'survivable/not survivable'.

While these are highly suspicious, the anonymous official's answer to the form's point 6 is outright false: 'Any evidence of medical defects affecting the crew' has been annotated with the categorical word 'None'. Prince William's diagnosis of porphyria – physical symptoms of which include bilious attacks, mental disturbances, general malaise and muscle weakness – had been recorded in his medical notes two years previously and should therefore have been available to the Air Accident Investigation team. It is possible that access to the prince's medical history was blocked by a force outside the DTI, and also possible that the same force prevented the prince's diagnosis from being recorded at the Inquest. At whichever stage or stages the information was withheld, there was incontrovertibly a cover-up of the prince's porphyria.

Nor is that all that was being concealed. An internal DTI minute from Training and Licensing Inspector C A Hayley, dated 24 November 1972 – four days before the prince's Inquest resumed – records that the prince's Private Pilot's Licence had expired on 11 July 1972, over a month before his death. Mr Hayley recorded:

'At that date [Prince William] had flown during the 13 preceding months 118 hours 5 minutes as pilot in command of aeroplanes (landplanes). This more than satisfied the requirement of 5 hours of such flying to qualify him for a Certificate of Experience to be signed which would renew the privileges of the licence as pilot in command of Group A aircraft for a further period of 13

months. He appears to have failed to obtain the signature to which he was entitled.'

This was never revealed to the Inquest Jury and if there was ever any written response to this minute within the DTI, it is not held by the National Archives.

It is actually possible to witness part of the cover-up unfolding, in an exchange between the Accident Investigation Board's Richard Westlake and William Sargeant, procurement executive of the Ministry of Defence's RAE (Royal Air Establishment) Bedford. The language is of confidentiality and consistency but the emerging motive is transparent.

In a typed and lengthy letter dated 3 January 1973, Mr Westlake wrote concerning Mr Sargeant's analysis of the above-mentioned BBC film of the crash:

'George Carley and I have now had time to digest your analysis and as your draft now stands there is liable to be some discrepancy between it and our formal AIB report when both are published.'

A little later, Mr Westlake's concerns became clearer as he stated:

'We shall never know whether [Prince William and his co-pilot] were aware of the precise position of the houses relative to the [flight path's] scatter point but certainly they had made only one previous take-off on this runway and this was not of the low level type employed in this race.

The excessive rate of turn may, therefore, have been a desperate attempt to escape from the trap and not just ham-fisted flying. The fact that entry into the trap may have resulted from poor judgement originating in over-enthusiasm to beat a rival is another matter [...]

You will see from the foregoing that the emphasis in our report is likely to differ from that contained in your conclusions. Whether you feel inclined to change your phrasing is entirely up to you [...]

Mr Sargeant's handwritten reply (dated 8 January 1973) acknowledges and assuages DTI concerns:

'I had modified my conclusions before I sent the report to the vetting officer and I think that has reduced the discrepancy you speak of.'

Here we see the question of possible princely incompetence being shuffled behind a rather nobler narrative suggestion, that of a doomed prince whose last thoughts were to avoid any loss of civilian life rather than to preserve his own in an inescapable crash. And indeed, this is the romanticised version that the DTI's report eventually adopted, overriding the Inquest's verdict of 'Accidental Death'. Neither version, ultimately, definitively identifies what actually caused the prince to crash.

However, National Archives file AVIA 101/745 is perhaps most interesting not for what it contains but for its folder. In common with such files of government paperwork, the brown card 'dust jacket' bears columns that record to whom the completed file was referred and on what date, allowing a reader to trace its bureaucratic travels. The first entry shows the holder was the DTI's aforementioned Mr Casley, on 6 December 1972. A decade later, on 16 March 1982, the file was marked as referred to 'Archives' and stamped 'CLOSED – No further action to be taken'. Another stamp (eventually cancelled by my FOI request and crossed out by Archives staff) specified 'Closed until 2071'. Archival darkness descended for four years, until 16 October 1986, when the file was inexplicably retrieved from storage and referred back to the Accident Investigation Board Registry. Four days after that, on 20 October 1986, the file was marked as being referred to 'DCIA'. The file stayed with DCIA for another four years before being returned to its archival hibernation and marked PA ('Put Away') on 26 June 1990.

Shortly after viewing the newly-released DTI file on the prince's crash, I wrote to ask the National Archives what the initials DCIA recorded on the file's cover might stand for. National Archives staff were able to offer no solution.

D/CIA was of course the official designation of the Director of the USA's Central Intelligence Agency, who in 1986 would have been William J Casey (died 1987). At the time, the

office was designated DCI (Director of Central Intelligence), until finally rationalised to D/CIA in 2005. In the absence of any known alternative, the look of this annotation on the file's referral list is that a British archivist unfamiliar with the correct abbreviation recorded the file being passed in 1986 to the then Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, whose successor William H Webster finally returned it four years later. However, if this is the case, the question of why the CIA might have been interested in secret documents on the death of a member of the Royal Family remains unanswered.

## **Afterword**

Briefly mentioned in contemporary news coverage of the death<sup>17</sup> was the fact that a gold signet ring was found on one of the burned bodies recovered from the wreckage, which helped identify the prince's remains because it bore an engraved 'W' surmounted by a crown. This ring was one of a matching pair commissioned by the prince's lover, Hungarian-born Zsuzsi Starkloff, who is still alive and wears the remaining ring on a chain round her neck. In 2012 she gave an account<sup>18</sup> of how she believed the Queen repeatedly attempted to force her and the prince apart over a period of years, and how she believes the prince was going to propose to her had he not been killed. I wrote to Ms Starkloff in April 2015 but received no response.

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<sup>17</sup> *Wolverhampton Express and Star*, 30 August 1972

<sup>18</sup> <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2193349/How-Queen-sabotaged-passionate-affair-cousin-Zsuzsi-Starkloff-tells-story-Prince-William-Gloucester-fell-scandalised-royals-process.html>>