



Duchesses: Living in 21st Century Britain

Jane Dismore

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The title of 'duchess' has long been part of Britain's heritage. In 2011, it was brought up to date with the marriage of Prince William and Catherine Middleton, when the Queen conferred a number of titles on her grandson, among them Duke of Cambridge. Catherine joined that select group of the highest ranking duchesses, well-known royals whose husbands are dukes as members of the Royal Family. But another group of women sit just one notch down from royalty, at the top of the aristocratic tree with their dukes. These non-royal duchesses enjoy titles that were bestowed by monarchs for centuries but they are a dying breed: it is unlikely that any more non-royal dukedoms will be created. Here, for the first time, ten of Britain's non-royal duchesses speak candidly about their role and their lives in the 21st century, an era when privilege is an unpopular concept. Each duchess also selects her favourite ancestor in the role, providing a colourful gallery from the 17th to the 20th century. The parallel biographies provide a thought-provoking comparison – for what does it mean to be a duchess in the 21st century? The results are often surprising and always fascinating. The title of 'duchess' has long been part of Britain's heritage.

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