

UK NEWS: RIDDLE OF MANSION ESTATE, CHANGED WILL AND MISSING FAMILY TREASURE



NEIGHBOURS: Northcliff is just half-a-mile from the Prime Minister's home, above

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By Ben Borland

IT IS an intriguing tale involving three former pillars of Gordon Brown's community, a feud over a 19th century mansion and claims of mysterious deaths and a will changed under coercion.

For more than 30 years, a row has been simmering over ownership of a £1million-plus estate, once home to the family behind one of Europe's largest paper mills.

Northcliff, on the banks of the Forth and just half-a-mile from the Prime Minister's home, in sleepy North Queensferry, is now owned by a GP's son and run for holiday accommodation.

But claims are surfacing that all is not as it should be and that the mansion was wrested from the mill family in dubious circumstances, with suspicion falling on a 1973 will.

And in a twist likely to shock the leafy neighbourhood, Ena Cochran – whose family formerly lived on the five-acre estate – believes her aunt's home was unwittingly taken from her on her deathbed by the GP treating her, an ex-police chief inspector and his solicitor wife.

Certainly, when Sheila Anderson died at 55, the Northcliff estate went not to another member of her family but her doctor.

A solicitor who helped Mrs Anderson's mother with her own will barely two years earlier also ended up with paintings from the mansion, while mystery surrounds a Mercedes sports car, antiques and a collection of valuable essays.

The GP's family insist he was "kind" and "distinguished", a close family friend of the Andersons and that he had been "totally shocked" when Northcliff was left to him.

Nevertheless, Ms Cochran, 59, of Dunfermline, Fife, who has only recently uncovered enough evidence to investigate her suspicions, is planning to meet a solicitor.

She said: "When I first started hearing these stories, I felt absolutely devastated. Apparently it was the talk of Dunfermline, when all of a sudden this lawyer was driving around in a sports car and the doctor was living in the house.

"Why should I be shafted? It is not just me involved – I have brothers, sisters and children, and they [her aunt and great-aunt] were my blood. I understand that it might be difficult for those who now own Northcliff, they are completely blameless in all this, but we are not talking about just one little house."

Northcliff and three adjoining cottages in the grounds are divided into nine furnished apartments available for short-term let.

The allegations date back to the early Seventies, when the estate was owned by Sheilah Anderson, a troubled woman with an alcohol problem, who lived with her widowed mother Henrietta, or 'Harrie'.

They were members of the family that founded the Anderson Paper Mill, in nearby Leslie, which went on to be one of Europe's big paper and packaging groups.

Six weeks before her death, in January 1972, Henrietta signed an updated will leaving virtually everything she owned to her daughter, including £55,755.75 in money and shares.

A solicitor called Alison Bruce – who befriended Sheilah and was married to William Bruce, a fellow lawyer and former chief inspector in Fife Constabulary – administered the will.

When Henrietta died, Dr Wardlaw Anderson – a local GP not connected to the family – signed the death certificate.

She was then cremated. Little more than two years later, in June 1974, Sheilah Anderson also passed away.

Her death certificate, signed by the same doctor, lists the causes as cirrhosis, heart failure and pneumonia. She was also cremated.

Ms Cochran said yesterday relatives had been told at the time her aunt was not in a fit mental state to have made a will, but after her death it emerged she had made one, dated November 26, 1973, leaving her estate to the GP.

A collection of paintings was left to William Bruce and the bulk of the money left over went to Guide Dogs for the Blind and the Scottish Society for the Protection of Wild Birds.

Mrs Anderson had also inserted a condition that Robert Campbell – a man befriended by the family after he was badly injured in a motorbike accident – be allowed to live rent-free for life in the upper floor of the mansion.

It was a chance meeting with Mr Campbell several years ago that fuelled Ms Cochran's suspicions. She said: "He said that what had happened there was 'not right', and that as soon as Sheilah died he was told he would have to leave Northcliff. He was given a small flat in North Queensferry."

She claimed that Mr Campbell, who has since died, told her that he saw “crate after crate” of empty alcohol bottles being removed by the Bruces and Dr Anderson after Sheilah’s death.

Ms Cochran added: “He also told me that Dr Anderson visited Sheilah morning, noon and night, and administered her daily injections. He said another GP had refused, so she went to Dr Anderson.”

Ms Cochran said she believes there was a police investigation in the Seventies, and that her mother may have pursued a complaint against Dr Anderson, who died in 1977.

However, any police files may now have been destroyed.

Duncan Anderson, one of the three siblings who now operate Northcliff, said his father had a “distinguished career” in the NHS across Scotland.

He also said there was no suspicion of wrong-doing surrounding the will and the estate.

Mr Anderson added: “He was a doctor of the old school – gaining an enviable reputation for his dedication to the sick in the area. Many testimonials were received in recognition of his kindness.

“My father and mother were close family friends of Sheilah Anderson and her mother, Henrietta, at Northcliff House.

“Our father was totally shocked when he was advised that Northcliff had been left to him. When he took possession, the house had been emptied of contents.

“Although she was not old, sadly, Sheilah had not been able to keep on top of the maintenance of the house and grounds and they were in a rather rundown state.

“There was a sitting tenant called Robert Campbell, and some of the ground floor had been converted to kennels.”

He added that Mr Campbell had asked to move out of Northcliff to be nearer his boat, which was kept in the harbour at North Queensferry, and picked out the seafront apartment himself.

“By agreement with his legal representative, we bought it, totally refurbished it and provided it to Robert rent and maintenance free for life,” said Mr Anderson.

“Robert was very happy with this arrangement.”