

meeting DIANA

While she only crossed paths with the late Princess of Wales three times, for Wendy Holden, the impression she left would last a lifetime.

It's 20 years since the death of Princess Diana. She is now an instant legend, in a pop-culture historical context. I thought that she deserved a proper historical novel and that was one reason why I chose her as a subject. I can also claim to have met her, in a way that would be great for any biographer in London and my path crossed Diana's several times. The first was at Buckingham Palace garden where I used to visit to create Chelsea potteries (all sold out). Diana, stopping to talk to them, included me, and for a few busy days each week, those famous blue eyes and light golden hair were directed at me.

In the second time, I had made friends, through my job, with the wife of the British ambassador. She was a friend of Diana's, who came to a party I was at. She came in, wearing a stunning grey, lace dress, and while everyone pretended not to notice, it was obvious they were watching her every move. I remember thinking how strange it was to be under such surveillance, even at a private event.

The final time we met was at the Christmas party held by the national newspaper I was by then working for. Diana stood in the middle of the room, in a shimmering silver dress, talking to the paper's editor. We were all terrified of him and so kept our distance, which was a shame as I never saw her again. By the next Christmas, Diana was dead.

I had needed jobs just before the news broke and my new editor, who prided himself on being conversationative, wanted a piece about

the Princess's sense of humor. This it was, while the whole world mourned, I rang up men who had worked one with Diana at the gym and outlined examples of her outlandish male jokes.

There always been assumed as people's journey to great fame, the periods through which they pass from obscurity to celebrity. It's usually a series of steps, one thing leading to another. I noticed that I didn't really know the steps Diana had taken from shy schoolgirl to Princess of Wales. She became the most famous woman in the world and yet that part of her life – the luckiness to the front cover – was relatively little known. How, exactly, had it happen?

The royal wedding of 1981 came about because of a combination of two opposing forces. By the late 1970s, Prince Charles was 36 and under pressure to marry. The right girl had to be found, and fast. She must be young, pretty, Protestant and an aristocrat.

"Without a post," too, as the newspapers said. Fair and beautiful. The goddess was, few girls matched the criteria. In accordance with the eye-widening double standards of the time, Charles had already been out with almost every eligible girl in Europe. Spurred by the Queen Mother at a family wedding, Diana was about the only one left. The palace tradition was to see her.

Lady Diana Spencer, as she then was, was more than delighted to be selected as a possible bride. But while the Windsor routine was practical and domestic, her motivation was different. Inspired by her childhood

with cousins nearby, she thought Charles was the obvious choice. Here she was, head over heels, smitten in love, and looking forward to a life of bliss.

This contrast is what *The Princess* is about: the fact that Diana and Charles were coming from completely different directions and neither had a clue about the other. That was always going to cause problems. On the other hand, what better contrast for a novel?

To draw a convincing portrait of the young Diana and her uncertain hopes, I had to immerse myself in her background and imagine what it felt like to be the very grand, but very damaged, daughter of parents whose unrequited love darkened her childhood.

But despite her better experience, Diana took refuge in an alternative romantic universe where love was rewarded and couples stayed together. This was the world of Disney, romantic novels, the young Diana was obsessed with (her step-grandmother's author, Barbara Cartland). She must have read hundreds of her books; ridiculous titles, preposterous plots and all. Most Diana biographers regard this as evidence of her lack of intelligence, but I felt it was much more significant, possibly crucial.

One of the themes I explore in *The Princess* is the possibility that these heart-rending, local sporting paperbacks about shining, wealthy dukes and romance young women gradually came to form Diana's world view. Her idea of love became founded on the unrealistic scenarios of her favorite reading matter. This explains

why, in the face of all the evidence to the contrary, she regarded Charles as the epitome of a romantic hero who would offer a life of bliss.

Diana's school days were great fun to imagine, especially after I discovered her boarding school (so what we would today call an outreach program to a local mental health facility). An understanding of such places, and the conditions within them, were in their infancy in those days, and most of the schoolgirls, not to mention the teachers, were terrified of the patients.

Diana, however, stepped out from the crowd of her peers with confidence and knew exactly what to do. Her respect, imagination and courage were instructive from the start, and of course, pointed the way to what was to come. Finding – and formalizing – that episode was inspiring.

The fateful moment – in a playground field in Norfolk – when Diana met Charles, is another crucial part of my story. The complicated route to the royal engagement had begun. It was a sort of social Grand National, with different hurdles to jump along the way. Prince Charles really introduced his girlfriend to the press at a polo match, so that was the starting line. The missing part was of course the chat at Westminster Abbey, or St Paul's as it turned out.

Relevant was the owner's *Booker's* books; many former girlfriends had come to supper there. Royal and freezing on the bank as Charles talked at the time, our ambassador's glasses were always packed up and sent back home. Another former



gettyimages

Credit: Princess Diana Archive

socialite's visit was raised by the press. Diana, however, passed the test with flying colors, playing charades with Princess Margaret. Ask and seek with the Queen and even sporting the paparazzi over her shoulder using her own past mirror.

Looking into that exclusive world was fascinating. But information was sometimes hard to come by. How, for example, to find what a week on the Royal Yacht Britannia during the Queen's special at sea birthday week had a huge collection of books as every royal subject imaginable. One just happened to be about Britannia, and full of details such as Prince Philip's many great candidates and the Queen's special at sea birthday week.

I had great fun imagining the Britannia. Diana's cheerful Shoney 50

in her Kensington flat with her girlfriends and girlfriends, doing all those little things like shopping at the Bretonnais, making up bed in a steam-filled kitchen, or watching TV with a bowl of cereal on her lap. These were my favorite little bits because they were happy and full of humor. I imagined these shiny clothes, swimming the place in silk robes, or hanging on the bathroom door.

Diana, who owned the flat, was in charge of the dressing room and had a sign on her bedroom door, "Chief Clerk". Looking at this flat behind the scenes into Buckingham Palace must have been so different. That was the final moment of *The Princess* and the final moment to imagine. From various sources, I learned that what she and her mother-in-law considered

Pre-wedding, Diana was so desperate for company, she sought out the footmen, who brought her burgers from McDonald's.

Diana's idea of love became founded on the unrealistic scenarios of her favorite reading matter.

before those five strange and lonely pre-wedding weeks when Diana, still only 33, had the attention of the entire world but none of the Windsors took the slightest interest in her.

Diana was so desperate for company, she sought out the footmen, who brought her burgers from the McDonald's in nearby Victoria station. Eating disorders followed, and growing suspicions about Charles. The moments Diana experienced, as did, as an owner, Diana herself.

But the wedding week chartered that's where I trace my story – at the point the fairytale princess steps out of her golden carriage. The point at which the fairytale ended.

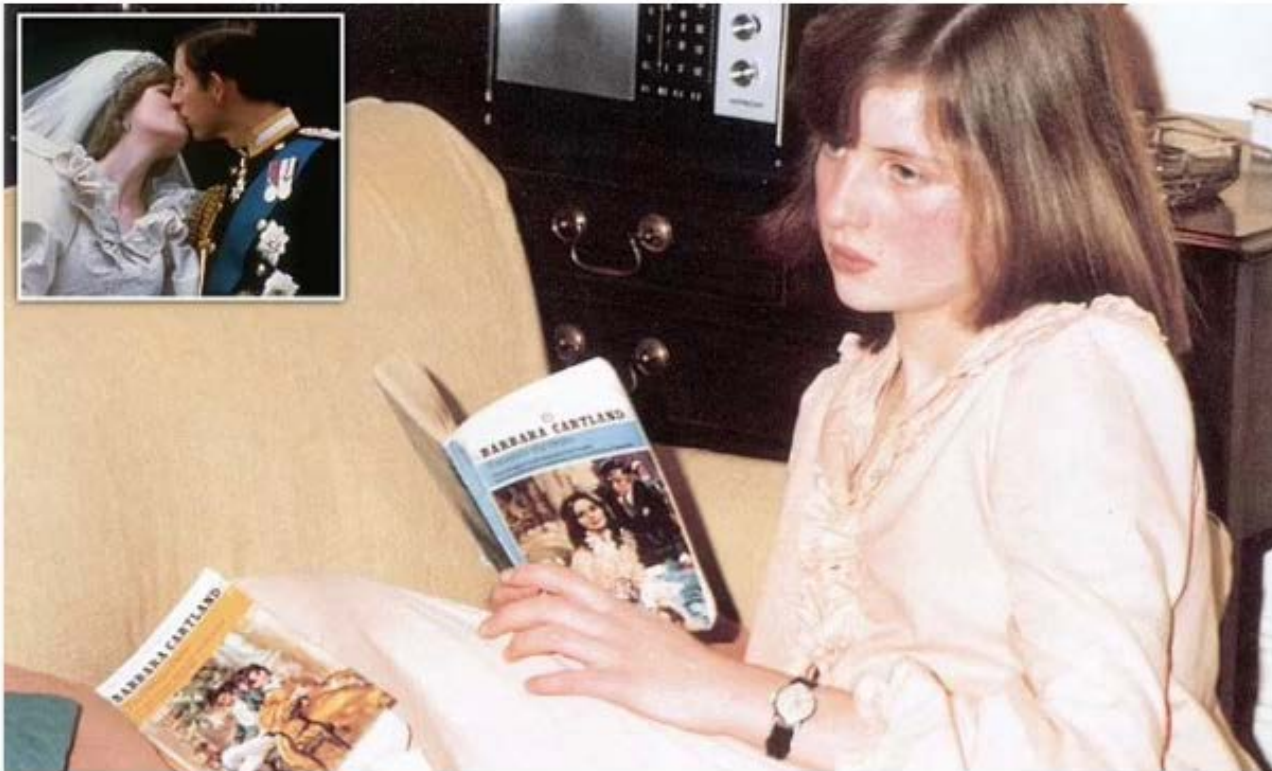
The Princess (Michael ANZ) by Wendy Holden is out now.



Why Diana's love of Barbara Cartland novels bewitched her into falling for the wrong man

By Wendy Holden for the Daily Mail

20:01 16 Aug 2023, updated 20:25 16 Aug 2023



Wendy Holden 'MY LIFE WITH PRINCESS DIANA'

The author of *The Princess*, a fictionalised retelling of Princess Diana's life, recounts the moment her life collided with the royal

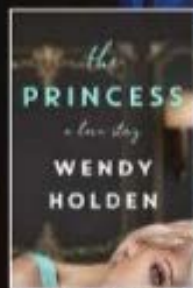


I was a teenager when Princess Diana entered my life. It was early 1981 and she was all over the papers, the blonde who'd captured the heart of the dashing Prince of Wales. The girl who'd succeeded where everyone else had failed.

It was during my first job after leaving university. I was working on a small magazine

aimed at foreign diplomats in London, a sort of *Tatler* for ambassadors. My main duty was to attend hundreds of parties, several a night, where eye-wateringly powerful drinks would be served. Well, someone had to do it and it was gratifying when this high-level diplomatic work was recognised with an invitation to a Buckingham Palace garden party. The Queen and Prince Philip would be there, and Charles. And Diana.

I was thrilled at the prospect of seeing Diana in the flesh and I wanted to hear her speak too. But how was I to meet her? Cunningly (and with their permission), I positioned myself next to a row of Chelsea Pensioners. As expected, she came up to chat. And so, for a few seconds, those huge blue eyes and that light, breathy voice were actually directed at me.



THE PRINCESS
Out Tuesday
(Weilbeck, \$32.99)

Wendy has re-imagined Diana's early years.

Our paths crossed again soon afterwards. I had made friends with Lucia Fiecho de Lima, the warm-hearted wife of the Brazilian ambassador who, it turned out, was almost a surrogate mother to Diana. She invited me to a party in her magnificent Mayfair house. Everyone pretended to carry on chatting when Diana entered in a beautiful close-fitting grey lace frock, but they were all staring like mad. I remember thinking that even at a private gathering she was gawped at, and how strange it must be.

I was firmly on the royal party circuit now. Not long after this I found myself accidentally

'Her story is glamorous, grand, strange, and sad...'

standing on the train of Princess Michael of Kent's ballgown (she was very nice about it). But Diana was the one I most wanted to see. At the Christmas party of a national broadsheet, I got another chance. She appeared in a column dress, sparkling, smiling, glowing. It would have been as easy as anything to talk to her but all of us journalists hung back because the Princess of Wales was standing with the paper's editor, of whom we were all terrified. The only people who went up to Diana that night were from the canteen and the post room.

And then, suddenly, Diana was dead. Bizarrely, the very morning it happened, my parents were on a rare visit to London. I had arranged a river trip and we chugged along, staring in disbelief at the half-mast flags on the bank.

Charles and Diana's wedding was one of the most-watched events in history.



The world watched William and Harry grow up.

Afterwards we went to Kensington Palace where, at that stage, hardly any flowers had been laid and there were hardly any people. It was too early. The hysteria was yet to build up.

It is over a quarter of a century since her death. A whole generation has grown up since that awful night in Paris, which makes Diana now part of the past. She's a historical figure, which is why I have written a historical novel about her. *The Princess* is a close imagining of her backstory, her childhood and school days, the brief, happy time in the Sloane flat and how it felt to be in the eye of that thrilling storm as the engagement to Prince Charles, initially a remote prospect, became a real one. Her story is glamorous and grand, strange and sad, sometimes all at the same time. Quite

often it is funny too, a never less than amazing tale of Princess not just about an aris girl who got lucky (or depending on your view it's an intersection of other elements. Brits changing bewildering in every imaginable way those at the top of the order failed to recognise. They also failed to see child they were shoe up the aisle wasn't quite as she looked my godmother and I [the wedding], open from our Huddersfield



Today
EXTRA
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PEOPLE'S PRINCESS

DIANA'S YOUNGER YEARS EXPLORED IN NEW NOVEL

Wendy Holden
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GOLD 24"

the hit list

Spotlight on ...

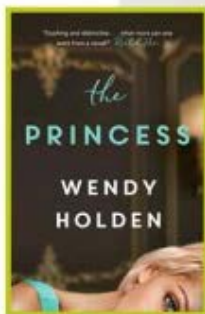
WENDY HOLDEN

THIS NOVEL MAKES YOU
RETHINK ALL WE KNOW
ABOUT PRINCESS DIANA

More than two and a half decades after her tragic death, Princess Diana continues to captivate the world. From the early days of her unhappy childhood to her explosive marriage to the then Prince Charles, it's easy to feel that we know everything about her life.

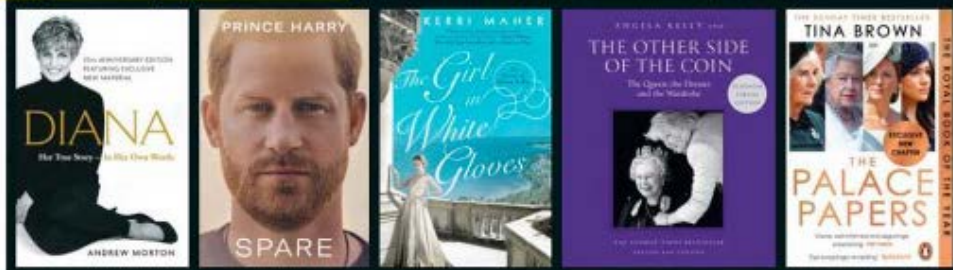
But it's her often-overlooked teenage years and how they shaped the person she would become that caught the attention of author Wendy Holden. In her fictional retelling of Diana's story in *The Princess*, Holden focuses on the young noble's obsession with romance novels to explore her route to the altar and why she so easily fell for the wrong man. She also offers a glimpse into the unknown world behind palace walls, as Diana is put through a series of trials to ensure she is up to the task of becoming the next Princess of Wales.

"Being young, aristocratic and without a past – a virgin – Diana did tick all the boxes of what the royal family thought was the right kind of girl," Holden tells *WHO* following her in-depth research on the subject. "But little did they know they were now on a collision course that would shake the monarchy to its core and change history." (Out now)



Right royal reads

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BOOK CLUB

LONERS, OUTSIDERS AND MAVENS ROMP THROUGH THESE PAGES. THEY'RE ALL PEOPLE YOU'D LOVE TO MEET.

REVIEWS ANNABEL LAWSON

LIONESS

Eviey Perkins, Bloomsbury, \$32.00

It's a messy novel with moments of greatness. Here's what happened before the story begins: Therese grew up in Wellington and she was what market analysts call a C-minus. Not well educated. However, she meets Trevor, who is more than 20 years older than she. They fall in love and marry. Trevor has an ex-wife and three children who – on the brink of middle age when we meet them – are poisonous brats.

Therese chooses not to have kids and would be out on the margins were it not for Trevor's gift to her: Therese Cassette Homewares. He bankrolls a chain of boutiques stocked with luxury items bought by trendsetters and also by nobodies – an exquisite travel wallet which will never hold a passport let alone a business class ticket; a feel-good item conferring imaginary status.

The story begins. Below the Thornes' penthouse apartment is a flat where Claire and her teenage daughter occasionally shake the building with loud music. Claire has detached herself from domestic duties. Her husband is travelling. Therese joins the wild woman in bacchanal dancing, which dizzes them into 'the zone'. So far, so good.

Meanwhile, Trevor is caught out. His son has been dishonest. One or both of them must go to jail. As for Therese: from C minus to chateaufine; from chateaufine to style icon; from style icon to reveller – and next? Perkins merely hints. A woman from the future in sandy-coloured raincoat looping on a deserted beach or dozing in dense foliage? To be continued... we hope.

UNTETHERED

Ayesha Moon, Hy, \$32.00

In Moon's debut novel, Rashid has a high-status job in Sri Lanka with staff, a chauffeur, and overseas travel. Zia's parents chose the suitors she met. Among them, Rashid was the only one she wanted. He stood up to his own mother's objections (Zia's dark complexion).

Riots break out. They're going to get worse. Rashid obtains a visa to emigrate to Australia and takes Zia and their baby daughter, Farah, to what he imagines will be a welcoming country brimming with opportunities.

Canberra, however, is a shock to both of them. Rashid cannot get a job, takes on shifts as a cleaner, changes his name to Richard and removes the postgraduate degree from his CV. He becomes bitter and silent. Eventually, groping out of their combined despair, Rashid gets a proper job. Zia has already found what she needs.

That isn't the end of their story. Yet, there's a Sri Lankan community in Canberra, yet the key to thriving is to join the wider society. Often the way forward is hard to recognise: if you're used to family networks working on your behalf. No final answers here.

ZERO DAYS

Ruth Ware, Simon & Schuster, \$29.00

Jack can scale walls, pick locks, and break into heavily barricaded areas. Her husband Cabe, sitting at home with his electronic devilry, can disable any artificial intelligence blockade. The first chapter of Ware's latest cliffhanger becomes a course in 'penetration' – the term used for physical and electronic break-ins.

Jack gets caught, but I won't give away the surprise here.

At home, Cabe's throat has been slit and Jack is the suspect. For five days she's on the run, wounded and targeted by the Met's meanest cyber arsenal, plus the throat-slitter wants her dead. One minute she's weak with hunger, the next she's vomiting. (A clue there?)

If you haven't been keeping up with what phones can do, you'll learn – Jack's forced to, and quickly. Breaking up the agony is Jack's sister Helen who, potty in one hand and a toddler on her hip, must undertake clandestine manoeuvres to save Jack, whose face is on every newscast. A taxi driver recognises her. He says, "I know you didn't do it." This is London and you can count on at least a third of the population giving you the benefit of the doubt. Will you believe the denouement?

THE LIBRARIANIST

Patrick deWitt, Bloomsbury, \$32.00

One of the conjuring tricks of fiction is an author who offers a web of tiny, meaningless events and then – surprise! – you're staring at the charisma of rivals. Very unfortunate that his best, and indeed only, friend is the one who steals his wife.

Pressed into the main story like a plum into kneaded dough are 101 pages from his life as an 11-year-old, when he very sensibly left home. Two entertainers, Ida and June, take him

on. It's 1945 and local cabarets are mowed down as television usurps live entertainment the length and breadth of America. The backstage repartee makes you weep for joy. When did you last hear words used as stylishly; sentiments conveyed so obliquely?

When the narrative finally zooms forward to 2006, that boy, a sponge to success, has become a happy old man. He's in an assisted living establishment as live-in helper. His boss, Maria, invites local children to a Halloween party. In our last glimpse of Bob, he gamely ducks for apples while the children hold back, converted to watching but never touching. Future loners?

CROOK MANIFESTO

Cuban Whitehead, Fleet, \$32.00

Whitehead appeared at the Sydney Writers' Festival earlier this year. He told us he was antisocial and his wife was a literary agent who understood that writing is serious business; the fewer distractions the better.

His latest novel, set in the 1970s, is the second instalment of a saga featuring Ray Carney, ex-fence, proud owner of a furniture store in Harlem. Carney's life has been crime-free for four years. His daughter wants tickets to a rock concert. Impossible mission for almost anyone but Carney and his underworld contacts. The price is just one more job.

Chapter by chapter, Whitehead shows us New York in the 1970s. Ugly. Arson is an industry. It's also a necessary adjunct to municipal politics. As Pierce the canny/corrupt lawyer explains it (page 237), crime is the indispensable glue which holds white-collar jobs and the wealth of their masters in place. Laugh. You can't help it. Whitehead's a comedian.

However, the dredged truth is sad and shaming. Whitehead's already won two Pulitzer Prizes and maybe this novel will nab a third.

THE PRINCESS, A LOVE STORY

Wendy Holden, Weirbook, \$32.00

In 1978, the hunt for a suitable virgin bride for the heir to the British throne was proving more difficult than anticipated. The last candidate standing was 19. Her mother had run off with a fancy man without saying goodbye to the six-year-old who grew up with fantasies and was young for her age.

For five Royals with a narrow agenda, plus the heir to the throne's valet, Diana Spencer was The Pick. The problem was Charles loved Mrs Parker-Bowles. Some said Diana should have been told. Others thought she had been told. The rest assumed that she must have figured it out.

As a junior reporter back in the noughties, Holden's 'beat' was the private lives of the Windsor family. She unearthed reliable sources. Her slant on the internal dynamics is

boldly persuasive. This ingenious novel spans the life of Diana from age 13 to the day before her wedding which, according to the plot, was when she learnt that the woman who she hoped would be her best friend was, in fact, her groom-to-be's mistress.

On the night she leaves her bubbly flatmates and moves into the Queen Mother's residence, there's only a footman to greet her, an omen that henceforth she will be lonely. She seeks advice. The Queen Mother has only two rules – both of them 'don't's'.

In acute need for guidance, Diana asks the Queen herself for a private audience. HM whips up scrambled eggs in a cosy parlour and what follows is a masterclass in tactics although, alas, none of Diana's questions are answered. Prince Phillip, Princess Margaret, Princess Anne, Prince Andrew and Camilla are captured stylishly. Despite the central tragedy, most of what we see is scintillatingly hilarious. Never a dull moment. **C+**

PHOTOGRAPH BY WILL HODNER STYLING BY ANNABEL LAWSON



Covers (pictured in Ayesha Moon's *Untethered*) are by Euphemia Fuchs, \$149.20/41, from Paris's La Pointe. \$115.00, \$27.99, and paperback paperback in Grey Skye. \$9.99, and paper, \$7.99, all from HM. Lane was, \$24, and Fiddle vintage vinyl table fork, \$10.95, both from Peppercorn by Tara Derris.



In the last of her historical fiction trilogy about women in the House of Windsor, author Wendy Holden tells the tale of damaged, dreamy Diana, who fantasises about one day being rescued by a handsome prince

They sat out down the Old Brompton Road. 'I know why you've come,' she said, hands in the pockets of her rust-coloured corduroy jacket. She had an easy stride and seemed in a buoyant mood. 'My grandmother's told me. I'm being considered as a possible Princess of Wales. You're going to give me all the background.'

Stephen made a non-committal noise. He didn't want to get her hopes up.

She slid him an amused, sideways glance.

'So give it to me. Tell me all about him.'

'What would you like to know? His favourite colour is blue, if that helps.'

'It might,' she acknowledged brightly. 'If I was buying him a jumper or something.'

'You wouldn't though,' Stephen said immediately. She stared at him.

'How do you mean, Mr Barry? Why wouldn't I?'

'Because I buy all His Royal Highness's clothes. If His

Royal Highness wants new ties, I get come from Turnbull & Asser. If it's suits His Royal Highness requires, Mr Watson comes from Hawes & Curtis with a selection of fabrics.' She giggled.

'Oh, I see. So it's all your fault, Mr Barry.'

'What is?'

'Well, he dresses quite formally.

Doesn't he. Does he ever wear colours?'

'Regimental or club. But that's about it.'

She snorted. 'Not that sort of colour! Reds. Pinks. Blues, as you say.'

'He never wears those,' said Stephen.

And can I ask you about his hair? Where does he go?'

Impatience swept through Stephen. She didn't seriously think the prince actually went to a salon?'

'I do His Royal Highness's hair,' he said with dignity.

'But traditional, isn't it? That side parting.'

'His Royal Highness has had the same side parting since he was a boy,' Stephen returned stiffly.

'But that's my point. Maybe he could modernise it a bit.'

She had to be joking. Stephen thought. Modernise and the Prince of Wales were not words you put together.

The idea was completely and utterly out of the question, and so was this girl.

'What are Prince Charles's favourite foods?' she asked.

'He likes cold fishy dishes,' Stephen said shortly. 'Salmon mayonnaise and prawns, that sort of thing.'

He glanced at her, she was moving her lips, as if learning it all off by heart. It was almost pathetic.

'They reached a small park. She commented on the cherry blossom: as thick on the branches as snow.'

Then she turned to him.

'Do you mind if I ask you something else?'

'Not at all.'

'About Prince Charles's girlfriends?'



Left: Prince Charles and Lady Diana in May 1981. Above: The couple on his at Royal Ascot shortly before their marriage

The question came completely from left field.

Perhaps Diana had heard the recent rumour, that the prince had actually proposed.

'Ah,' he said, assuming an expression of sombre sympathy. 'Miss Knatchbull, I presume.'

He had expected her to look nervous, even despairing.

To his surprise, she beamed. 'Oh no,' she said, brightly.

'I know that's not real, Grandmama's explained. Prince Charles is doing his best to feel strongly about her and she's doing her best to feel the same. But they don't really love each other. Not like I love him.'

It was hard to know what to say to this.

He had the strange feeling that she was in control now.

'They sat, and she turned to him with a smile.

'I've been doing my research, you see.'

'Research?' He tried not to sound surprised that she even knew the word.

'About the ex-girlfriends. I've been looking at old newspapers in the library.'

She wouldn't have to look very far, he guessed.

Whenever a new girl came into the frame, the histories of all the others were reviewed at the same time. The papers carried double-page spreads

with the same photos, a sort of rogues' gallery of royal eyes, each accompanied by a so-called fact box.

'I just wondered why Prince Charles had broken up with them. I thought,' she added, blushing slightly, 'that if there was a reason, I might learn from it.'

Stephen was impressed; these were proper tactics.

'What happened with Princess Astrid, for instance? Wasn't he going to marry her? That's what the papers said.'

The valet hesitated.

Then again, he had been given his instructions.

He was to help.

'Princess Astrid was a red herring,' he stated firmly.

'Not one of His Royal Highness's staff had ever met her and we weren't sure that he had himself.'

She looked surprised.

'Oh. Does that mean he never met Princess Caroline of Monaco either?'

'He met her once.'

'But everyone thought he was going to marry her as well. Didn't they?'

They did. Stephen could almost hear the prince's complaining voice.

'The wretched papers all have me going up the aisle with her! But the only time I met her was at that boring thing in Monte Carlo.'

The blue eyes widened.

'I MIGHT LEARN FROM IT'

'But Princess Caroline is very beautiful.'

'Not his type. He likes good English complexions.'

Her English complexion reddened with pleasure.

The enquiring blue eyes went back on him.

'So, what happened with Georgiana Russell?'

Stephen was amazed; she really was extraordinarily well informed.

'Miss Russell came to the polo,' he revealed. 'Then she went to Cowes and Balmoral. The private detective and I always said that the ones who survived polo, sailing and Scotland had a chance of surviving the course.'

She leapt on this.

'The course?'

'Becoming the Princess of Wales is a succession of challenges,' Stephen said.

'It's like the Grand National – a horse race with lots of jumps and hurdles. The polo is the starting line and the finishing post is the Abbey. But no-one's got that far yet.'

'No,' she said thoughtfully, before meeting his eyes and grinning. 'Not yet.'



Her happiest time

In her new book, *The Princess*, author Wendy Holden sheds light on how Diana's teenage years shaped her life

From viewers of the Crown to voracious readers of Prince Harry's memoir, the world remains captivated by Diana, Princess of Wales, despite 26 years having passed since her death. "Everything from her idyllic childhood to the demise of her marriage to Charles and the Paris car accident that tragically ended her life having been thoroughly examined, is there anything left that can shed new light on the extraordinary young aristocrat who broke the mould and changed the monarchy forever?" Author Wendy Holden believes it is Diana Spencer's often-overlooked teenage years that provide the greatest insight into what shaped her to become the woman the world fell in love with.

In her new historical fiction novel, *The Princess*, Holden focuses on Diana's years in boarding school and the period she spent living in a flat with girlfriends in Sloane Square en route to the altar, concluding the story with her wedding to the then Prince of Wales at barely 20.

"This was the time when I believe Diana was happiest in her life," Holden tells *ROYALS*. "It was a time of great laughter and love and hope."

It was also a time when

Diana would often be found curled up in a chair, engrossed in the latest tale about a wide-eyed heroine and a dashing prince in the latest Barbara Cartland book. While Diana's love of romance novels has often been dismissed, with biographer Tina Brown calling them "the literary equivalent of afternoon TV soap operas" in *The Diana Chronicles*, Holden paints a different picture.

"Her reading habits have been used, in a way, to imply that Diana wasn't very bright. But she was funny and empathetic and had a real way of connecting with people – so clearly she was very clever," Holden explains.

"And the more research I did, it seemed the only way she came to be the Princess of Wales – with how she accepted the Palace control of their courtship, and how much in love she was with Prince Charles – was that she'd spent her life waiting to be rescued by a prince. Even though she was fundamentally unsuited to this one!"

While hailed as the "romantic of the century" in its early days, Diana and Charles' relationship was never a fairy tale. The couple – who had a 12-year age gap – met just 13 times in person before he proposed.

"In 1979, Prince Charles

was 30 and the royal family were desperate for him to marry," says Holden. "The girl had to tick certain boxes. She had to be aristocratic, Protestant and without 'a past' as they say. By this time, they'd tried out so many potential brides-to-be, Diana was the only option left."

As history shows, the marriage of Charles and Diana quickly imploded following the birth of their sons, Princes William and Harry, as he rekindled his love affair with former girlfriend Camilla Parker Bowles.

In the end, Diana died without finding her great romance. But would she have ever forgiven her ex and his mistress, who is now his wife and Queen?

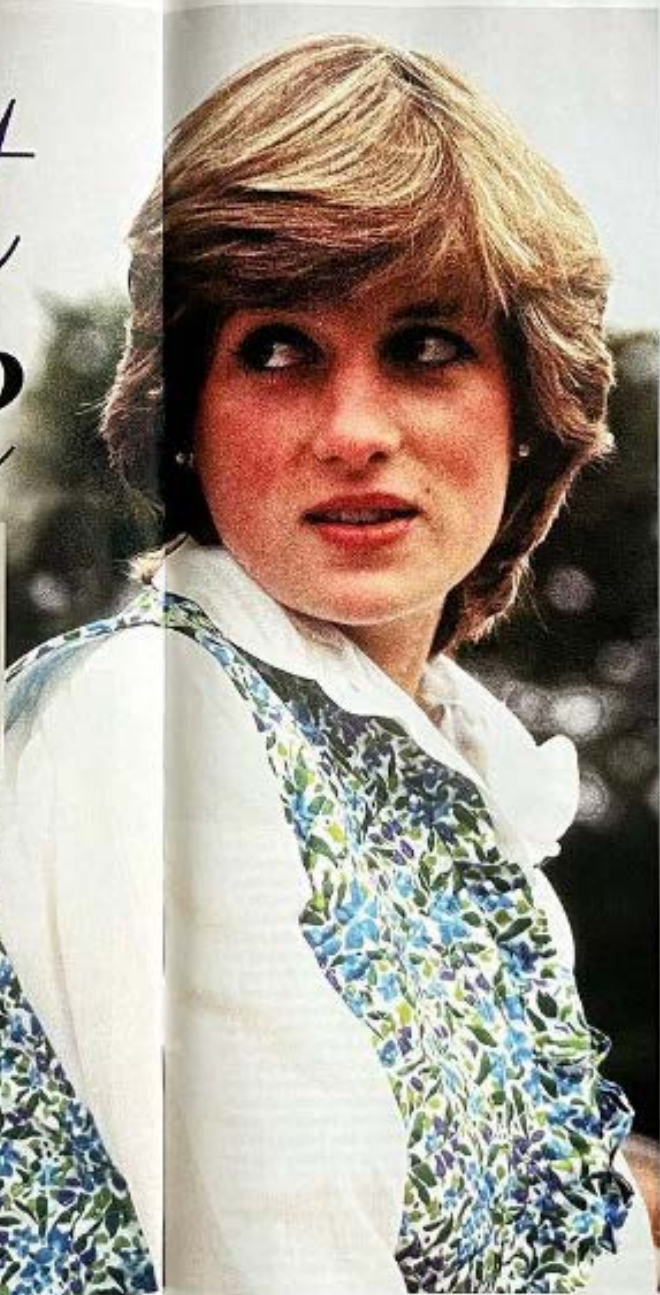
"I think she would – especially if she'd found her own great love. She'd have moved on and laughed it off," Holden says.

"I don't think Diana would care much about Charles and Camilla at all now. What she'd be really upset about is the fallout between her sons."

By Kylie Wolfers



WENDY HOLDEN



The Princess

"Now, you have to be warned, the place is a mess, so just look delighted and say how wonderful it is." Stephen issued his instructions above the roar of the engine. The noisy mid-blue Granada was his least favourite from the royal carpool.

He had met Diana round the back of Coleheene Court. The front was now almost permanently manned by journalists and photographers keen to get the latest on "Shy Di" as they called her, presumably because of the demure way she glanced up from under her hair.

"His Royal Highness is still deciding whether or not to buy it," he went on. "It's a Georgian gem. Nine bedrooms, six bathrooms, four beautifully appointed reception rooms, three hundred and forty-seven acres of rich arable farmland."

"It sounds wonderful!" she said.

Everything felt wonderful now. Most wonderful of all was that the seemingly disastrous picture had actually helped her.

The prince had been pleased with the see-through skirt, Mr Berry had said. As a result, she felt almost grateful to the press.

They had blocked in her car and pursued her down the street, but she was trying not to mind. She was even starting to learn to co-operate.

It was less fun for her flatmates of course, who got no benefit from it whatsoever. They were stoically supportive, even so, and never complained about the phone constantly ringing, and having to post photographers whenever they went to the corner shop. They even joked about having to put make-up on all the time now and look presentable.

Stephen

Stephen, at the wheel, was also musing on journalists. That Diana seemed to have worked out how to handle the notoriously difficult press was a definite feather in her cap. None of the prince's girlfriends had

ever done that before. She was doing well, unexpectedly so.

And she had other reasons to feel confident, too. Today's destination was one of them. The very fact that the prince had suddenly decided to house-hunt showed that marriage loomed large in his mind. That, finally, he was resigned to it.

The Highgrave Estate, in the village of Doughton near the market town of Tetbury, came strongly recommended in the wooded Gloucestershire countryside, less than a hundred miles from London. It was on the market for £800,000 and seemed ideal. But before the prince signed on the dotted line, a very particular lady was asked to give her view.

That lady now had, and Diana was coming up to give hers.

Stephen turned off the main road through a set of rusted wrought-iron gates.

She turned to him, evidently thrilled. "Are we here, Mr Berry? How exciting!" She stared about her with shining eyes as they crunched up the gravelled half-mile of drive.

"His Royal Highness will be delighted that you think so. He told me he wanted a woman's view of his dream home."

"Oh, Mr Berry! Did he really say that? A woman's view?"

"He did indeed," the valet confirmed, smoothly. She didn't need to know which woman.

Diana

Highgrave was adorable, she thought. She had been expecting somewhere rambling and vast, but it was like a little box built of pretty pale stone. Grand, yes, but cosy at the same time.

She could easily imagine living here, setting up house. Mr Berry's words had filled her with delight. The clear implication was that the prince wanted to show her the home they would be sharing together, that they would bring up their children in. Greater happiness could not be imagined; it was her life's dream to live as a family – mother, father and children all under one roof. ▶